

ADVENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Announcement To Joseph

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was late in the afternoon of Christmas Eve back in 1991. The Children's Christmas Eve Service was just hours away. I was sitting in my study at church when the principal came in to say he'd just received a frantic phone call from Mrs. Gray. Her son, Aaron, who had the role of Joseph in that night's Christmas program, Aaron had chicken pox. The principal concluded, "It's too late to get another Joseph. We'll just have to write him out of the program." And that's what he did. The service went on without a 'Joseph' and many who were there didn't even realize the cast was incomplete.

One third grade girl was asked by her grandfather, "Where was Joseph?" She replied glibly, "He was trying to find a parking space for the donkey." But most who were there that evening got along just fine without a Joseph.

Joseph just doesn't seem to be all that important, does he? I mean, you can tell all the important parts of the Christmas Story, you can talk about God taking on human flesh, Immanuel, "God with us," and not even mention Joseph's name.

This morning/evening we are going to take a look at The Announcement to Joseph, the third of the three great Advent announcements.

But we begin with the question: Does the Announcement to Joseph even deserve to be in the same class as the other two?

Just compare the **content** of the three announcements:

The Angel Announcement to Zechariah was the over-whelmingly good news that the aged priest and his elderly wife Elizabeth were finally going to be parents. And not only would they have a son, their son would be none other than the "voice calling in the wilderness" prophesied by Isaiah.

The Angel Announcement to Mary was the over-whelmingly good news that she would be the human mother of the God-Incarnate Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

The Angel Announcement to Joseph was a command to marry his fiancée who was pregnant by someone other than Joseph.

Just compare the **response** to the three announcements:

After Mary heard the angel's good news, she hurried to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who by this time, was six months pregnant. There the young Mary burst into song. The Song of Mary, the Magnificat, has been sung by Christians and incorporated into Christian worship for two thousand years.

After nine months of complete silence, a complete inability to talk, when his son was formally named 'John', the elderly Zechariah burst into song. The Song of Zechariah has been sung by Christians and incorporated into Christian worship for two thousand years.

After Joseph received the angel's announcement, he did not burst into a song that has been sung by Christians and incorporated into Christian worship for two thousand years. After Joseph received the angel's announcement, verse 24, ". . . *he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him . . .*"

No song, no dance, no flowery speeches - Joseph ". . . *did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.*"

That response makes Joseph a faith-hero and makes his response instructive for us. His faith resulted in God-inspired service, obedience to God and an act of mercy and compassion to Mary, and it carried with it the possibility of public ridicule.

For a person given such an important task as being the guardian of the Savior, we know very little about Joseph. Much of what we know about him is taken from the words of our text. So what does our text say about Joseph? In verse 19 of Matthew chapter 1, Joseph is called a "righteous man." In other words, he was a believer. He was looking forward in faith to the coming Savior. Just as we look backward to a Savior who has come, Joseph and the Old Testament believers looked forward to a Savior who was to come, the Messiah.

Most likely Joseph was faithful in worship, a person who studied God's Word regularly, a person who was motivated to moral and upright behavior by his love of the Lord. In addition, he probably observed the Sabbath, celebrated the holy days and paid his temple taxes on time. That's why the Bible calls Joseph a "righteous man."

This righteous man was faced with a moral dilemma. Verse 18, ". . . *Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child . . .*" His fiancée was expecting a child, and he was not the father.

In the Jewish culture of that time, a man and woman were "engaged" when they were still children. Their parents entered into an agreement and arranged for their eventual marriage. When the children matured and were "of age" for marriage, they were publically "betrothed" to each other. In front of witnesses, the couple would speak vows, promising to marry each other, ratifying the engagement arranged earlier by their parents. From this point forward they were regarded as "husband and wife," but they did not live together as husband and wife for a period of about one year. This was a time for building a relationship, getting to know one another, a time to plan their future.

The bond of betrothal was considered so important that a decree of divorce was necessary to break the betrothal, even though the couple had not yet consummated their marriage. After about a year of being betrothed, the final stage of marriage was accomplished by a public ceremony followed by the wedding feast. A public banquet was held and the entire village would attend. (It was just such a wedding feast that Jesus attended in Cana when he performed his first miracle. John 2:1-11). After the wedding banquet, the couple would be granted all the rights of a husband and wife, and the marriage would finally be consummated.

Our text originates in the betrothal stage of the marriage between Mary and Joseph. It would be understandable for Joseph to be upset by Mary's pregnancy. Joseph was a just man, a righteous man, a man of principles. This righteous man knew that he had options. How he chose to react would determine what would happen to Mary and the unborn child.

If Joseph followed through with the requirements of the law (Deuteronomy chapter 22), the outcome was clear. Mary would be stoned to death in front of her father's house. But not every option was so final. There was a second option available. Joseph could divorce Mary without subjecting her to the stoning normally associated with adultery. Giving her a writ of divorce, he could break the betrothal, dismiss Mary from any obligation to be his future wife and continue on with his life. This could be a public or a private matter but it would end up disgracing Mary while maintaining Joseph's standing in the community. Joseph's reputation would be safe and he would continue to be seen as a righteous man.

A third option was to marry Mary quickly before anyone noticed that she was pregnant. This option would reflect badly on both Mary and Joseph as it would look like the couple had sexual relations prior to marriage. It would look like they had broken God's law forbidding adultery.

When the angel came to Joseph, he had already made his decision to divorce Mary quietly. The angel said, *"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit"* (verse 20). The angel explained that Mary had not been dishonorable or unfaithful. The child she was carrying was not the child of another man. It was the child of God.

God had chosen Mary for a very special purpose. Joseph was well aware of the prophecy from Isaiah which said: ²³ *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."* Imagine the shock and maybe the sense of relief when Joseph found out that his own wife, THE WOMAN to whom he was betrothed, would be the 'virgin' mentioned in scripture.

It took courage to follow God's will when every ounce of sense he had told Joseph to divorce Mary. In silent submission, Joseph listened to what God told him to do. Stay with Mary. Support her. Protect her and the child. *"Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* Be responsible for the child's needs and the child's safety. Raise this son as if he were your own.

Joseph believed and he obeyed. Joseph denied his own needs, his own reputation, his name and his social standing. He chose to deny himself to honor God through his obedience. He turned his belief into action and became a great example for us to follow. Joseph was a very important person in the life of Jesus, not only on the night of Jesus' birth, he was very important in the early years of Jesus' earthly life.

(Given the same opportunity, I certainly wouldn't write Joseph out of the Christmas account today. He's our model of faith and obedience.)

Just like Joseph, we need to focus on turning our own belief into action and honoring God through obedience to what he commands. We all have trials and difficulties in our lives. Unexpected things happen even to believers. Can you face them in a way that is in keeping with God's will, a way that honors God and gives him glory? There may be tragedies and heartaches in your future, a great financial loss, the diagnosis of a serious disease, the injuries from a serious accident, the loss of a loved

one. Will your faith lead you to respond as a child of God, an example to others, trusting that he will work in all things for your good, or will you get angry at God and curse your fate?

You can face your problems by taking the easy route and following whatever response society says is “proper.” Dr. Phil and Dr. Drew have all kinds of advice for people with problems. But, that advice usually involves self-centered actions and not God-fearing decisions. Remember, you won’t have an angel in your dreams telling you what to do, which choice to make, which road to take. But, you do have the simple commands of God to love him with all your heart and to love your neighbors as yourself.

There will be times in the near future when the displaying of your Christian beliefs will bring you into the face of ridicule or mockery or disrespect. Will your faith lead you to react in a way that honors and glorifies God, or will you be tempted to quietly slink away and avoid confrontation?

Will your faith lead you to guide your children or your grandchildren into the paths of the Lord, or will you give up and allow them to be guided and directed by the philosophies and moralities of the world around them?

Will you turn your back on those in need and avoid the troubled soul who needs a lot of your time, or will your faith lead you to step out of your comfort zone and show love to others as God has shown love to you?

Joseph is a great example for us to follow. Joseph denied himself to honor God through his obedience. He believed and he obeyed. May your faith lead you to do the same. Amen.

Let us pray.

Dear Heavenly Father,

With joyful hearts we look forward to the celebration of your Son’s birth. We thank and praise you for the wonderful message of salvation through faith in Him our Savior and Lord. As we participate in the study of your word and partake of your sacraments, increase our faith and strengthen our resolve to do your will in our lives.

Your announcement to Joseph inspired him to action that was in accord with your will but contrary to human reason. May our Advent preparations move us, all the more, to serve you in ways that please you, give to you honor and glory and expand your kingdom.

We ask this in Jesus’ name and in his name we join in praying: