

## 1 Sermon, December 22, 2013

Texts: Matthew 1:18-25

Title: "The Story of the Love of God: Joseph"

1. Lots of Step-Dads today; it takes faith
2. Joseph had a dilemma
3. Joseph believed in a dream and stepped out in faith.

### 1. Lots of Step-Dads today; it takes faith

The story of Joseph, Jesus' dad, is a story of faith.

I use the phrase "Jesus' dad" intentionally. I've had conversations with young men who have told me about the man who raised them; he may not have been my father, but he was my Dad.

In these days when divorce and remarriage is pretty common, being a step-parent is also fairly common.

And being a step-parent is perhaps harder than being a biological parent. As a step-parent, you know that you're raising somebody else's child.

If you are, say, a step-Dad, and the biological father is still in the child's life, you don't have quite the authority of the biological father. You don't have the authority, but you still have all the responsibility when the child is in your care. There are so many decisions to make – so many on-the-spot decisions – but you can't make them.

The wonder is that so many step-Dads and step-Moms do such a good job in raising kids who are not their own.

### 2. Joseph had a dilemma

Joseph became more-or-less a step-Dad to Jesus. His moment of decision to become a step-Dad, we read in Matthew, was at least partly the result of a dream.

Joseph had a dilemma. A dilemma is a difficult choice between two things.

Joseph probably thought the two choices were:

- A. Letting Mary take the full punishment of the law, or
- B. Letting her off quietly to go somewhere else.

Joseph could have become angry at this personal betrayal by Mary, to get pregnant by somebody else. Joseph must have felt the

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weight of shame, that his family and Mary's would be tainted by this illegitimate pregnancy.

The law said that adulterers were to be stoned – and Mary's pregnancy was technically a violation of marriage, so it was technically adultery. If Joseph were angry, he might have insisted that the family's honor be restored by Mary being put to death.

The other alternative that Joseph likely saw was to divorce Mary quietly. This would have resulted in her staying in her parents' home, with no prospect for marriage, another mouth to feed and an object of shame for the family.

In that situation, most families would have rejected their own daughter, sending her off to fend for herself. Many rejected daughters would wind up prostitutes for the Roman cohorts in cities throughout Israel or sell themselves as slaves to the wealthy.

Joseph, probably after sleepless nights and much wrestling with what was right, had decided on the second option. He would divorce Mary quietly and perhaps she could find a life somewhere else, and perhaps that life would be OK.

### 3. Joseph believed in a dream and stepped out in faith.

But there was a third option, that Joseph probably hadn't even considered. It was to receive Mary as his bride, go ahead with the marriage, and claim the child as his own. That would have been unheard of.

But Joseph had a dream. In the dream, an angel appeared to him, "Here," whispered the angel, "is the key that unlocks your dilemma. This child is God's child. I want you to go ahead with the wedding, and become the father of God's child."

The angel went on, "Give him a name. Call him Jesus, which is similar in Hebrew to the word rescue or deliverance, because he will save people from their sins."

"Oh, and this is to fulfill a promise from Isaiah, "A young woman will conceive and bear a son called 'Immanuel – God with us.'"

Joseph stepped out in faith. He listened to the angel who spoke in his dream. He obeyed. He became Jesus' step-Dad.

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That may have taken every bit as much faith as Mary needed to accept that she would bear God's son.

In his sleeping state, Joseph allowed God to speak to the depths of his heart and to offer a resolution to his dilemma that his human reason had failed to discern.

Joseph took a big risk, all because God had spoken in a dream. He risked the judgment of others for doing what seemed foolhardy. He risked an unknown future and a huge responsibility: "Who, me? I'm supposed to raise up a child who will be the savior?"

In essence, Joseph woke up from sleep and said, "Not my will, but thine be done."

That's all we really know about Joseph. We know him for this one decision he made, to go ahead and wed Mary, and be the Dad to her son.

Matthew's gospel tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, which means he wanted to do the right thing by his relationships and loyalties. Joseph's righteousness was deeper than simply observing laws and customs. It was a righteousness that allowed him to hear the angelic voice of his dream and obey its commands. As a righteous man, he could look directly at the reality which now confronted him, see it and all its implications, and do God's bidding without regard for his own reputation. He could accept the angel's word that the child was of the Holy Spirit; he could accept the duty, usually assumed by the mother, of naming the baby.

So my prayer today is for the step-Dads and step-Moms of the world. My prayer is for the grandparents who step in to care for their grandchildren when it's really not their responsibility. My prayer is for all those who've stepped out in faith to care for someone who is not a relative, and maybe not even a friend.

And my prayer is for each of us, as we face a major decision like Joseph did. I pray that we may be led in our choosing to do the thing that is most compassionate, despite the risk or shame we may face.

Amen.

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18 This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph was a good man[a] and did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he decided to quietly call off the wedding.

20 While Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. 21 Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus,[b] because he will save his people from their sins."

22 So the Lord's promise came true, just as the prophet had said, 23 "A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel," which means "God is with us."

24 After Joseph woke up, he and Mary were soon married, just as the Lord's angel had told him to do. 25 But they did not sleep together before her baby was born. Then Joseph named him Jesus. (CEV)

18-19 The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

20-23 While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term:

Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").

24-25 Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.