

A Carpenter Wrestles With Christmas

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Date: 22 December 2013

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[0 : 00] Next to the child lying in the manger, the most significant character in the drama that is Christmas is the child's mother.

But next to her, the most significant character in the drama is the child's adoptive father. Because he, Joseph, Mary's fiancée, does not speak in the drama, many people refer to him as the forgotten man of Christmas.

Yet he, the quiet, gentle carpenter, like many of you quiet and gentle types, speaks volumes. His actions do the speaking in the drama. There is a Chinese pastor in Beijing who regularly closes the worship service with the benediction attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

Go, preach Christ, and if necessary, use words. Joseph, the carpenter, preaches Christ without speaking a word.

[1 : 18] And in the process, shows us what it means to be a disciple of his adopted son. I think Matthew, the tax collector, who tells the part of the story where the carpenter wrestles with Christmas, holds Joseph before us as the model disciple.

I think Luke, the medical physician, who tells the part of the story that involves the Virgin Mary, holds her before us as the model disciple.

Let it be done to me according to your word, she says to God after learning that she would conceive the son of God. For Matthew, though, it is Joseph who initially experiences Christmas as a horrible nightmare.

It is Joseph who is the model disciple. When we first meet Joseph, he is in great pain, deep emotional pain.

If you've ever been betrayed by someone you trusted, you know something of what he is feeling. He was engaged to marry a lovely young lady.

[2 : 34] Actually, he's more than engaged, he's betrothed to Mary. You might know that getting married in the first century involved three stages.

The first was engagement, going through a formal ceremony where the man and woman pledged their lives to one another. The second was betrothal. Betrothal was a legally binding stage.

After this engagement ceremony, the man and woman would not live together for about a year as they prepared for the wedding. And so legally binding is this betrothal stage that if either of them has a relationship with another person, they are considered an adulterer or an adulteress.

If either of them die during this betrothal period, they are referred to as a widow or widower. The third stage is the wedding itself, when the whole village would gather together to celebrate and to bless this new couple.

During the betrothal stage, Joseph had been busy doing what any other man would do in the first century, preparing a new home for his bride-to-be.

[3 : 48] He's caught up in all the physical and emotional energy that goes into homemaking. He's alive with expectations. He's dreaming of love and happiness when he can finally bring Mary home.

And then comes the shocking news. Mary is pregnant. Joseph was stunned, to say the least, deeply hurt.

How could Mary do this to herself, to him, to them, to their future? The only logical explanation is that Mary has not been faithful to her betrothal vows.

The only logical explanation is that Mary has slept with another man. She has committed adultery. I would like this morning, all too briefly, all too briefly, reflect with you on Joseph's wrestling with what is going on in Mary.

And I want to reflect on how he wrestles both before and after he learns the mystery. Joseph shows us what discipleship looks like both before and after he's told the mystery of Christmas.

[5 : 06] The mystery that what is going on in his fiancée is the work of the Holy Spirit. So look at how he wrestles before the mystery.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. It means that Joseph was faithful to all his relationships. Righteous, faithful to relationships.

In right relationship. Especially in right relationship with the living God who has revealed his will in his law. Joseph wants to be faithful to God.

Joseph is a right relationship man. Now in the law, when a woman is unfaithful, she is to be taken to the court and publicly exposed for having broken the legal bond.

So too a man if he breaks his vow. In the book of Numbers, chapter 5, it is stipulated that the priest is to have the woman drink the so-called water of bitterness.

[6 : 08] If she has not been unfaithful, she can drink this water and not get sick. But if she has been unfaithful, the water will make her abdomen swell and she will, quote, bear the curse, close quote, suffering great public shame.

As Joseph the righteous struggles in his pain, he chooses not to exercise his legal right.

Why? Because although he seeks a right relationship with God's law, he also seeks a right relationship with Mary. He does not want to publicly shame here.

What good would that do? So he chooses to go to Mary secretly. According to the law, he's to take two witnesses with him who then sign a certificate of divorce.

Now I'm humbled by the carpenter's actions. As he wrestles with what begins as a nightmare, Joseph is able to rise above his personal pain and seek righteousness, right-relatedness, not only with the law he loves, but with the lady he loves.

[7 : 30] Before he learns the mystery, Joseph illustrates one of the tensions inherent in discipleship. Truth and grace, truth and grace, grace and truth.

Following Jesus Christ in this world means living in this tension of truth and grace, grace and truth. On the one hand, never watering down God's holy law.

On the other hand, extending mercy to those who break the law. Not easy to do. Truth and grace. Grace and truth.

Now most of us lean to one side or the other, don't we? Faithful discipleship means doing as Joseph did. Living with both feet firmly planted in truth and grace, grace and truth, without giving up on either and doing it all simultaneously.

Richard Mao, who is the recently retired president of the Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote a helpful book entitled Uncommon Decency.

[8 : 45] The subtitle is Christian Civility in an Uncivil World. Dr. Mao observes that those who are good at being civil often have no strong convictions.

And those who have strong convictions are often very uncivil. And what we need, says Dr. Mao, is convicted civility.

Being passionately faithful to God's revealed truth and doing so with uncommon grace. Joseph models convicted civility.

Before learning the mystery of Christmas, He lives in this tension of grace and truth, truth and grace, giving up on neither, holding to both simultaneously.

Now while wrestling with what to do, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph. I think it's the same angel, Gabriel, that appeared to Mary, telling her the mystery.

[9 : 51] Only this time, the angel appears in a dream. That, as you might know, is what happened to the other Joseph in Scripture, Joseph, son of Jacob.

So much so, that that Joseph is called Joseph the Dreamer. God sends an angel to Joseph the Carpenter, in a dream, to explain that what is feeling like a nightmare is not.

I think he wants a lot of us to know that. That what might feel like a nightmare is not.

Something wonderful has taken place in Mary's womb. Wonderful for her, for Israel, for the world, and for Joseph. God has not left Joseph alone as he anguishes over what to do.

And God does not leave us alone either. God communicates with Joseph as he does with anyone who seeks to be righteous, to live in right relationship.

[11 : 04] As Joseph's adopted son would later say, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. The angel tells Joseph the mystery.

Mary has not been unfaithful. More is going on than Joseph could initially know. The angel says to Joseph, that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

Of the Holy Spirit. Of the Holy Spirit. That is what explains the strange thing happening in Mary and Joseph's life.

Reference to the Holy Spirit would take Joseph back in his mind to the opening of the scriptures he loves, to Genesis 1.1, where in the beginning, the Holy Spirit hovers over the void of nothingness, and out of that void of nothingness, brings forth this creation, which we enjoy.

Joseph is being told that something like that is happening again. The same Creator Spirit has hovered over the nothingness of Mary's womb, and out of that nothingness, bringing forth a new creation.

[12 : 27] A new creation, which the angel brings out in the name Joseph is to give Mary's child. Name him Jesus.

Yeshua. Yahweh is salvation. Yahweh saves. This new creation can only be called Jesus, for that is who he is.

God to the rescue. Which is why the angel further says, for it is he who will save his people from their sins.

His people? Israel is the child's people? I thought Israel was God's people, Yahweh's people. His people? He will save his people?

Israel is the child's people? Yes, because the child is Yahweh himself come to save his people. Literally, the angel says, he himself will save his people.

[13 : 31] He himself? No one but God can save his people. Give him the name Jesus, for he himself will save his people from their sins.

For he himself is God himself come to the rescue. Which is why Mary's child is also called Emmanuel. Of course, Emmanuel, God with us and God for us.

That is the mystery. That is the mystery of Christmas. Jesus, Emmanuel, has been conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin. Joseph, your beloved Mary has not been unfaithful to you. What is going on is that God has been faithful to his promise to save his people. and is acting in a way no one ever dreamed he would.

And then, the angel tells Joseph how he is to participate in this mystery. Each of us participates in the mystery in different ways.

[14 : 35] Joseph is told to participate by saying, the angel says, take Mary as your wife and give the child the name Jesus.

To be told to name Mary's child is a technical way of saying adopt him. Joseph, you did not father this little child, but you are now to take him into your heart as your own.

You officially adopt him. And Joseph does. At great risk. risk. And that too is what Joseph teaches us about discipleship.

To believe the mystery and then to live the mystery is to take a huge risk. Joseph runs the risk of public shame.

I mean, what will happen when the citizens of Nazareth start adding up the dates? Let's see. the engagement was on. The child was born on.

[15 : 44] Something is off here. In fact, the four Gospels record incidents in which Jesus is slandered by some as an illegitimate child.

Take Mary as your wife. To do so, Joseph runs the risk of losing face socially. so do we.

The mystery of the conception and birth of Mary's child does not fit the presuppositions of a modern or post-modern world.

This mystery simply does not fit the presuppositions about what can or cannot happen in this world. Do you really believe all this stuff?

I've been asked that question many times. I would imagine you too have. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity.

[16 : 46] You really believe that stuff? To believe that stuff is to run the risk of being shamed as intellectually incompetent and then to run the risk of being socially ostracized.

To embrace the mystery Joseph also has to risk radical altering of his lifestyle. How could it be otherwise? You take a child into your world and your whole lifestyle changes.

No? It just changes. You enter into any relationship with anyone and your lifestyle changes. But Joseph more so because in that culture everything depends upon reputation and character and up to this point Joseph has a great reputation as a man of integrity and holiness.

Take Mary as your wife. What? He spent years building up his business and his reputation take Mary as your wife.

And he did. He believed the mystery and lived the mystery running the risk of major changes in his lifestyle. So too are we.

[18 : 14] Will we embrace this risk? When Jesus Christ enters our life we cannot expect things to be the same as they were before he came.

his mere presence in our lives upsets the apple cart and he begins to call us to a different way of being and living in the world.

His different way of being and living in the world. To embrace the mystery of Christmas and then to live it means being open to having our private universes turned upside down.

all of this of course raising deep anxiety right? Which Joseph Matthew's model disciple models for us.

Joseph embraces the anxiety that by necessity accompanies risk. Anytime we risk at whatever level there is anxiety about how it will all work out.

[19 : 23] Here I am helped by a man named Rudolf Bultmann. I do not agree with everything Bultmann wrote in case you know Bultmann. But he was right about faith.

Faith he said is an openness to the future. Faith is an openness to the future. Not having to have the future all spelled out in front of us before we decide to follow Jesus.

And this openness to the future says Bultmann involves a readiness for anxiety. A readiness for anxiety that each of us have to take upon ourselves with resolve.

He continues faith is this readiness for anxiety because faith knows that God encounters us nowhere else than precisely where from a human point of view there is nothing.

a surgeon I know by the name of Mel Cheatham says that the great turning point in our lives comes when we say I do not know how the future comes together.

[20 : 36] I do not know how the future comes together. It's at that point that God now is free to be God. Joseph the carpenter had no idea how his future with Mary and her child was going to come together.

All his plans for the future are now changed. Nothing's going to be as he planned it to be. All he has to go on is this word from God.

This strange thing happening in your life is of the Holy Spirit and the command take a name.

Take Mary as your wife and give him the name Jesus. So what do you sense God is up to in your life these days?

Where is the Holy Spirit hovering over you? What dream is God dreaming in you? Quiet Joseph stands before us posing the question will we trust Emmanuel?

[21 : 52] Will we embrace the uncertainty and walk into the future behind him? I do not know how it all comes together.

Oh boy do I want to know but I do not know. You do not know how it all comes together. but Emmanuel does. Jesus commands my destiny.

Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit and she will bear a son and you will give him the name Jesus for he himself will save his people from their sins and Joseph arose from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and the world will be forever grateful.