

JOSEPH—THE DREAMER

Who would you trust with your kids?

We're not talking about baby-sitters, or teachers. If something dire happened to you, to whom would you entrust your kids? Who would you want to raise them in your place? Who shares your family values, parenting styles? Whose character commends them to your confidence?

Many parents have legal agreements in force specifically designating another couple to care for your children in the event of your deaths. It's something all parents should consider doing. Better you should choose than have the courts choose for you.

But who would you pick, and why?

Have you ever thought about the fact that when God the Father sent his Son into the world, he had to pick the parents who would cherish and protect the infant Jesus. God chose small town folk—an engaged couple from Nazareth, on the northern outskirts of Israel. People living in Jerusalem thought about Nazareth like we might think of a Yooper town, like Iron Mountain or Watersmeet. These are plain, simple people.

God chose Mary to be the mom. In Luke's Gospel we read that Mary "...found favor with God." Why? We get few clues. Only that Mary was instantly responsive to God's news: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

And he picked Joseph to be the step-dad. Joseph would have to man up to his fiance's pregnancy, absorb her shame, protect and lead his young family, and raise the Son of God, a child not his own. Men, any volunteers?

Why Joseph? Let's turn to the Gospel according to Matthew.

Matthew tells us virtually all we know about Joseph. His Gospel begins with Joseph's genealogy which Matthew offers it as proof that Joseph was legal heir to David—a descendant of all the kings who reigned from Jerusalem. And in verse eighteen of chapter one, as Matthew begins the story of Jesus' birth, he does so almost entirely from the perspective of Joseph.

Read Matthew 1:18-19.

Jewish wedding customs were very different than ours. When couples got engaged, they made public, legal commitments to each other. Even though the bride and groom did not set up housekeeping together until the actual wedding which could be up to a year away, they were considered by all to be legally bound to each other. Breaking an engagement was so serious it required a divorce. There would have been a contract in which the groom pledged a *ketubah*, a payment to the bride's father. Usually the *ketubah* represented about ten months' salary, enough to support a woman for a year. The *ketubah* became the property of the bride in the event of her husband's death or a divorce.

It was during this engagement period that Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, allegedly by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man. That meant that he was an observant Jew, a faithful son of Abraham. He obeyed God's laws. Because of this, Joseph would have faced significant pressure to divorce Mary. Jewish Rabbis sometimes argued that divorce was mandatory when husband discovered unfaithfulness on the part of his wife. In his culture, continuing the engagement would have been considered a black mark on Joseph's character.

So Joseph considered divorce—remember, it took a divorce to end an engagement. But what kind of divorce? Remember the *ketubah*? Jews at that time had two divorce options. One was like our no-fault divorce. A husband simply declared his displeasure with his wife, gave her a writ of divorce setting her free from the marriage, and walked away. It was quick and usually a private affair.

But a no-fault divorce meant that the husband had to pay the *ketubah*. A man could suffer a significant financial loss in a no-fault divorce.

Another kind of divorce was for-cause. For instance, if a man had proof of his wife's infidelity, he could go to the courts, get a judgement in his favor and get the divorce. In a for-cause divorce, if the woman was ruled unfaithful, she forfeited the *ketubah*.

Joseph was a righteous man who understood his cultural obligation to divorce Mary. But how? A public, for-cause divorce would save him ten months' wages, but expose Mary to the public humiliation and shame of a judicial procedure. A no-fault divorce would spare her but cost him financially.

Joseph had decided on the no-fault option. He was as kind as he was righteous.

Let's read on—v. 20-23.

This is the first of four dreams in which God's angel would interrupt Joseph's sleep to deliver God's instructions. God sent his messenger to Joseph to set the record straight about Mary. And Joseph got the message—v. 24-25.

The implication in the text is that as soon as Joseph woke up—that very next morning—he initiated whatever steps were necessary to bring Mary home as his wife. And when Mary's baby was born, Joseph named him Jesus, just as the angel had said.

We miss a cultural insight here. Giving a child its name meant something significant. By naming Mary's baby, Joseph publicly claimed the child as his own. In every way, Joseph stepped up and embraced the role God had entrusted to him.

Let's jump over to Mt. 2:13-15. The Magi have come and gone. An angel had warned them in a dream about Herod's jealous rage so the Magi quietly took back roads out of Israel. Danger was imminent. Joseph had another angel visit in another dream.

If you were writing a screenplay for a movie about the nativity, how would you script this part? I can imagine the camera slowly zooming in on a restless, sleeping Joseph. His face twitches and jerks as he reacts to the angelic visitor. Suddenly, dream over, Joseph wakes and sits bolt upright in bed.

He shakes Mary awake, telling her they have to pack quickly and leave for Egypt, about two-hundred miles away as the crow flies. Joseph jumps up and starts throwing things into bags, chattering anxiously about Herod, soldiers and danger. Mary rubs her eyes sleepily and wonders out loud, "Joseph, what in the world! It's the middle of the night and you want to what?"

Ladies, how might you have responded to your wild-eyed husband? Joseph packed up his small family and left "during the night." His response was immediate. And by leaving under the cover of darkness, no one would have been awake to see which direction they headed.

Historians tell us Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. Joseph and Mary had been safely tucked away in Egypt for some months now, perhaps sustained by the costly gifts presented by the Magi. But after Herod's death, Joseph had another dream.

This one was expected. The angel had told him to flee to Egypt and "Stay there until I tell you..." The time had come. Look at v. 19-23.

Once again, the text implies that Joseph's response was immediate. The angel said, "get

up and go back to Israel.” So Joseph “...got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.” After a fourth dream warning him against returning to Bethlehem, Joseph headed north to Nazareth, settling into their home town, the place from which the whole adventure had begun.

And with that, Matthew concludes chapter two, and brings down the curtain on most of what we know about Joseph. Luke adds one other small detail. Joseph was still around when Jesus was twelve. The family had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover and Jesus lingered behind in the temple, asking questions and interacting with learned Rabbis. When his mother questioned him about his absence, Jesus said, “Why were you searching for me? ...Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house” (Luke 2:49)?

I wonder how Joseph heard that—“...my Father's house”?

Then Joseph disappears from the Gospels entirely. Most believe that by the time Jesus began his public ministry, Joseph had died. The man to whom God the Father had entrusted his Son had been, in the words of the Old Testament, “gathered to his fathers.”

There's so much we don't know about Joseph. But what little we do commends him highly:

- He was a righteous man, faithfully following all the laws God had revealed in the Books of Moses.
- He was a kind man, willing to endure financial loss in order to spare Mary unnecessary shame.
- And he was instantly obedient every time God spoke to him.

I think perhaps it is this last that God anticipated when he picked Joseph. God trusted Joseph's immediate obedience.

When we were still pastoring in Eastern Oregon, we invited a revival team to come to our church. One phrase they used during our week of meetings has always stuck with me: “Delayed obedience is disobedience.” They used it first while talking with kids about being responsive to their parents. And while all of us grown-ups were bobbing our heads in agreement, they turned to us and applied it to our response to God.

What obedience, they asked, are you delaying? What might God be saying to you that you are resisting? Ouch! Delayed obedience is disobedience.

Most of us don't hear from God through our dreams. But most of us do have a pretty clear sense of when God is speaking to us. God rarely mumbles.

What might God be saying to you that you are resisting?

Joseph leaves us an example of one whose obedience was immediate. He was righteous—he had a track record of doing the right thing. And his righteousness wasn't harsh or brittle. He was kind, even when kindness was costly.

And he obeyed immediately. He didn't second guess God. He didn't rationalize and delay. He did what God asked.

Let me give us a simple two-word response to what God asks of us. Are you ready? Here it is: “Yes, Lord.”

Let's try it together: “Yes Lord.”

May God habituate our hearts to immediate obedience, and may he give us the grace of Joseph to say “Yes!” whenever he speaks to our hearts.