

12.14.25 Sermon Transcript – Matthew 1:18-25

So some of you know that when I was in my late high school years, early college years, I was a part of more evangelical circles within the church. And within this sort of segment of the church, there was a strong undercurrent of what's often referred to as “purity culture.” And in purity culture, especially for women, we are told that basically the only currency you have is your reputation, so you never want to do any kind of thing that can mar your reputation as somebody who is pure Christ. So I carried with me for a time that that mindset that somehow my reputation was the only currency that I had. Honor and shame were of the utmost importance, and so I had better not do anything to scandalize myself. Now, thankfully, I did come to understand that purity is not, in fact, the only form of currency, especially when you are a beloved child of God, and that my worth and value comes from something beyond my reputation.

But I couldn't help but think about that time period in my life as I was reading the scripture passage yesterday, knowing that I would need to actually end up preaching a last-minute sermon today. But that was in the back of my mind as I was reading about this story of Joseph and Mary. Joseph and Mary lived in a world that was very based upon honor and shame. Honor was a person's currency. A man's righteousness was measured by his ability to control the narrative, to appear righteous without doing any kind of wrongdoing.

And so we come into this story today with these circumstances around Mary and Joseph and Mary's pregnancy with Jesus. Mary and Joseph are betrothed, they're not yet married, but they are in a legally binding contract, and Mary tells Joseph she's pregnant. I mean, I would be fascinated to be a fly on the wall during that conversation when Mary breaks this news to Joseph. But today, today we hear this story about the sort of messiness and the loss of control that comes from saying yes to God.

So the story begins with a sense of confusion with a man trying to do the least painful thing in a complicated situation. Mary is pregnant. That shame that Mary will expect to experience is also transferred on to Joseph because she is betrothed to him. Joseph, like Mary, is on the precipice of facing a loss of reputation, a future that he had planned is now starting to look very different for him. I mean, this is challenging. Obviously, it's a challenging place for Mary to be in, but it's also a challenging place for Joseph to be in, in this culture of honor and of shame.

And so Joseph makes a plan that he's just going to divorce her quietly. He's not going to make a big scene about it, but because they were already in a legally binding contract, it would be a publicly legal action that would permanently alter Mary's future. Joseph wasn't one to go to the edge of town and declare it and expose Mary. He wanted to do as right as he could by her, given society and given this culture of honor and shame. Now, Joseph had the legal and the social power on his side. He could have publicly exposed Mary, which would have meant severe punishment for Mary. It probably would have been public shaming, social ruin, and lifelong vulnerability where she would have had to depend on the generosity of others just to survive.

But he doesn't do that. He already does not want to let that happen to her. He's already inclined towards a more merciful approach. He's already inclined towards a more compassionate path.

But then he has a dream. And the angel says to Joseph, “Stay. Stay with Mary and do not be afraid.” In other words, tie yourself, tie your future to a story that no one is going to understand. Tie yourself to a story that people are going to judge you for. Because there's no promise of safety for Joseph in all of this. There's no promise of a restored reputation. There's no promise that eventually people will get it. But the angel tells Joseph, “Stay.” And Joseph, he just wakes up from his dream and he does it. He doesn't protest, he doesn't bargain. He just says yes to God. Something else that I think is important that we hear in this story is that Joseph is the one who names Jesus. In other words, he is publicly claiming Jesus as his child. He aligns himself with Mary, with Jesus, and with God's unfolding plan.

You know, today we don't necessarily have proceedings happening at the city gates, but we do live in a world of fast, very public, and often permanent judgments. I mean, we see that all around us. We see it especially on social media. And Joseph, he could have put his reputation first. And in fact, that's what many of us would probably want to do or be tempted to do. He was in a difficult situation, and one could understand why he might feel like that. We might be tempted to be the ones to tell our sides first. “I'm going to get my story out there first, before anyone else. I'm going to make sure people know that I am the one that was wronged here and throw someone else under the bus. I'm going to put enough out there, post enough, share enough to look justified or righteous in what I have chosen while letting assumptions hang in the air or allowing others to draw faulty conclusions about what's going on without correcting them or even just throwing somebody under the bus.”

We can probably relate to Joseph at some point in our lives, but maybe, maybe sometimes God is giving us an invitation to stay or to stand with someone whose life complicates our own. Maybe sometimes God is asking us to absorb misunderstanding rather than to try to deflect it. Maybe sometimes God is asking us to be seen as foolish or naive because we are saying yes to something God is calling us to, even when the rest of us of the world may be judging us.

When I read this story, I can't help but hear this underlying theme that obedience to God will not always make us look good and it will not always make us understood. But if we think about what happens with Joseph and with Mary, Joseph says yes to God. He stays with Mary. He claims Jesus as his own child, and yes, he now lives a life where his reputation has been risked. He also now lives a life where he ends up having to flee with his family from the persecution of Herod to another country. Joseph places himself in a vulnerable position by saying yes to God, but ultimately he gets to be the earthly father of the Son of God. He is one who raises Jesus up as his own, who bears witness to his life and his work. I think sometimes we forget about Joseph in the story, but his yes to God was just as important as Mary's yes to God faith.

Faith is not about managing perception or controlling the narrative. It's about trusting God with the parts of our lives that really are beyond our control, the things that we can't control. And I think Joseph learns that when he says yes to God, he finds Christ with him, Emmanuel. When we say yes to God, even when it's inconvenient, or people are not going to understand or judge us, or we have to bear the weight of scandal when we say yes, we do in fact find Christ in our midst. So

today may we take a lesson from Joseph that being faithful to God, saying yes to God, while it can lead us on paths that are challenging, it leads us to Christ with us, Emmanuel. Amen.