

"FACES AT THE MANGER (#3): MARY AND JOSEPH"

(Matthew 1:18-25)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 12-15-24]

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1. Read CEB Text: Matthew 1:18-25 and Pray.
2. For the past three weeks we've been sharing in a series called "Faces at the Manger", looking at some of the characters in the biblical Christmas story and what they might teach us about life and about our relationship with God.

A--And today our focus turns to two persons who's faces are probably the most iconic and recognized of all Christmas images (at least religious ones): that of **MARY and JOSEPH** huddled over the baby Jesus in his cradle.

B--We find this image on Christmas cards and stamps, on holiday ads, appearing as tree ornaments, and even as lapel pins for our clothing.

3. But more than just an iconic image, I believe their story has an important lesson to teach us in our lives, as well. So, let's recall that story together:

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4. First, remember that Mary is a young teenager from a poor family living in the obscure village of Nazareth, in the tiny nation of Judea, under the foreign rule of Rome.

A--Then one day, an angel named Gabriel visits her and tells her that she will conceive and bear a son by the Holy Spirit, and that she is to name him Jesus (Luke 1:26-37).

1--We also learn that she's recently become engaged to a village carpenter named Joseph (something in those days as legally binding as marriage is today), but she's had no intimate relations with him as yet.

2--So you can imagine what she -- a potential unwed mother -- would have been concerned about: the whisperings behind her back; the pointed fingers, the false accusations, the raised eyebrows; the questions, gossip, criticism, family pressures; the crude jokes, and the cruel laughter.

B--Far from the serene, angelic look that images usually portray Mary as having, it must have been incredibly difficult to even *consider* what God was asking of her!

1--Yet, in Luke 1:38 (which wasn't read today), Mary responds to God by saying, "*Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*"

2--And in the verses to come (Verses 46-55) she sings a song of praise to God (called today the "Magnificat" ¹) that expressed her willingness to accept and surrender herself to God's plan for her life.

5. In the meantime, today's scripture from Matthew 1 tells us that Mary's fiancé Joseph finds out about her pregnancy and is understandably upset. ²

A--He was, after all, a fine, upstanding, respected citizen, and when word of this got out, he'd be humiliated & shunned --the laughing stock of Nazareth! So, what should he do?

1--Well, according to Jewish law & custom, he had every right to publicly expose and humiliate her, & even to ask for her to be stoned to death for infidelity.

2--But Vs. 19 tells us that "*Joseph her husband was a righteous man, & because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly*"

3--It was at this point that Joseph has a dream in which an angel of God appears and tells him, "*Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit*" (Vs. 20).

B--So, in spite of the grave risk to his own reputation, Verse 24 tells us that "*When Joseph woke up, he did just as the angel from God commanded him...*" ³

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6. Now, the rest of Mary & Joseph's story -- their journey to Bethlehem, finding "*no room at the inn,*" & Mary giving birth to Jesus -- we'll save for Christmas Eve, because what I want us to focus on *today* is their *willingness to be used by God* for His purposes & plans.

7. In other words, we learn from them the importance of the spiritual practice of "**SURRENDER**" ⁴ -- of making ourselves "available" to be used by God in our world (with the third candle of Advent wreath reminding us of this practice). ⁵

A--Mary, for example, was willing to offer her physical being (her body) to God as the mother of God's own son, ⁶ which was an act of worship that carried consequences not just for the nine months that she carried Jesus, but for offering him love, compassion and nurture for the rest of his earthly life -- the surrender of her *physical self* became a surrender of her *very life!*

B--And what about Joseph? ...A man of integrity, honor and compassion who had much to lose by sticking with Mary and doing what this angel said.

1--Yet, Joseph "*...did just as the angel of God commanded him*" (Matt. 1:24).

2--And in so doing, he surrendered his good reputation as an act of worship to God.

8. So, on that *first* Christmas, Mary surrendered her *physical being*, and Joseph surrendered his *reputation* so that God's will could be accomplished through them.

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9. I wonder... *this* Christmas, **what thing(s) are you and I willing to surrender** so that WE (like Mary and Joseph) can be used by God?

A--Maybe, like Mary, you're willing to offer your *physical being* to do the Lord's work.

1--...Not necessarily to bear a child, but perhaps to volunteer your body & hands to help others through some ministry or mission of our church

2--Maybe it's to help serve needy families through one of our O'Rourke Ministry events at Eastgate Community, or going to Trinity Table twice/year to serve a meal to homeless persons, or maybe it was returning an Operation Christmas Child shoebox, or a gift for the recent Angel Project, or filling an Advent Blessing box this month for needy families here in Newnan, or in joining Trish and I in going on our church's mission trip to El Salvador next summer.

3--Maybe it's in knitting shawls for persons with serious illness through our Prayer Shawl ministry, or visiting our Homebound members through our "We Care" ministry, or serving as a helper/counselor for our children's or youth ministry. ⁷

B--Or maybe God's calling you -- like Joseph -- to be more willing to surrender your *reputation* or your *popularity* with the "in" crowd so that you can serve *God* more.

1--Some people today (even in the church) care more about the crowd they hang with than about whether or not that crowd truly follows/serves God.

2--As a pastor I've had to learn that as much as I'd like to, I can't please everyone all the time, and that I shouldn't really *try*, because that's *not* my job.

3--Instead, as I think Joseph's experiences teaches, following *God* sometimes means we have to do things that seem unpopular or that risk being misunderstood, but yet are absolutely God's will for us -- following God's will is certainly not going to win us any popularity contests!

C--Or perhaps there are other things God is calling you or I to surrender...

1--Maybe it's our *time, talents or abilities* so that we can devote more of these to helping people in need instead of just helping ourselves.

2--Maybe it's our *ears* that God wants, so that we can better listen to the hurts and pains of others.

3--Maybe we're being called to surrender our *finances* or other material resources so that we can make a difference in the lives of others.

4--This year, all of our members and friends received a letter about an invitation to participate in a "Gift for Jesus" financial gift -- to consider sharing an "over-and-above-tithe" gift to help our church end the year "in the black"; perhaps God is calling you to participate in this in some way.

10. The bottom line is that the stories of Mary and Joseph reveal that those of us who claim faith in God are called to offer all that we are and all that we have to be used by God for His glory -- our minds, bodies, possessions, time, finances, and even our influence. ⁸
11. So, this Christmas, what would it mean for you to **ACCEPT** God's rule over your life and **SURRENDER** yourself to God?
12. [PRAYER]
13. [Suggested Closing 11am Music: UMH#221, "In the Bleak Midwinter"(esp. sing Vs. 4)]

ENDNOTES:

¹ "*Magnificat*" comes from the Latin for Verse 46, "*Magnify the Lord, O my soul...*"

² Joseph is one of the "unsung heroes" of the Christmas story. Over the years we've unconsciously ignored him and pushed him far into the background. So much so that one writer has called him "*the forgotten man of Christmas*" (James Moore, "*What Can We Learn from the Christ Child?*", Christmas Reflections, p. 23). This is even implied in our language about the holy couple: we usually say "*Mary and Joseph*," rather than "*Joseph and Mary*").

³ Notice that whereas Mary responded to the angel with *words*, Joseph responds with *action* "he **DID** as the angel... *commanded him.*"

⁴ Another way to describe this spiritual concept is in the word "**ACCEPTANCE.**"

⁵ That's really what the biblical word "faith" is all about -- the Greek word (*pistis*) literally means "*Believing in God so much that we commit ourselves -- body, mind and soul -- to the doing of God's will, [no matter what happens]*" (James Moore, "*What Can We Learn from the Christ Child?*", Christmas Reflections, p. 19).

⁶ "*Here I am, your servant,*" she said to God, "*let it be with me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38).

⁷ And don't forget that throughout the centuries, some Christians have even offered *their* bodies to the Lord as martyrs -- killed for their faith in Jesus.

⁸ As we surrender ourselves to and are willing to be used by God, we need to remember at least two things:

(#1) *Accepting* God's rule over our life and *Surrendering ourselves to God's use may involve pain and difficulty*. Mary faced the physical pain of labor and childbirth, and the potential emotional shame of having a child essentially out of wedlock. Joseph faced the potential disgrace and tarnished reputation that accompanied him having a fiancé who was pregnant with someone else's child.

(#2) *When we accept God's rule and surrender ourselves to God's use, good things always come out in the end*. In Mary's case, this was true quite literally! After the pain of her labor, she bore a beautiful baby son, Jesus. And even though Joseph had to risk his reputation and standing in his community, in the end he was received again by his hometown and continued his work as a carpenter.

Romans 8:28 reminds us that "*All things work together for good for those who love God.*" So, though Mary and Joseph's sacrifices involved pain and hurt, it led to something good. When they surrendered themselves to God and allowed Him to use them in His service, God took their hurt and turned it into something beautiful. There's an old chorus that goes... "*Something beautiful, something good. All my confusion He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife, but He may something beautiful of my life*" (United Methodist Hymnal #364). That's what God did for Mary and Joseph when they made themselves available to God. And that's what God can do for you and I when we make ourselves available to Him in the same way.