

## **#firstcenturyproblems**

Matthew 1:18-25

### **Slide 1: Manger Scene**

We humans love to make plans. We all have different ways of making plans, but we all have intentions for a future that we map out in some way. Plans help us organize our lives, give us structure, and ultimately give us a direction for life. What happens then, if our best laid plans suddenly change without warning and we are thrown into a quandary?

For just a brief moment, I'd like for you to picture in your mind the Christmas manger scene. You know -- the portrayal of Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, donkeys, cows, sheep and shepherds or magi all huddled around in a little barn strewn with straw.

Maybe you even have yours in mind at present - a manger scene that you inherited from your family or

bought from another country or received as a gift from a special person. Or, perhaps you have seen a manger scene on display somewhere around Eau Claire, such as the one at Sacred Heart Hospital?

Either way, have you ever seen a manger scene without Joseph in it? Imagine a crèche scene without Joseph. Of course, we can't. We can't because we know that somewhere along the way in the most important story of the entire universe, Joseph said yes to carrying out God's plan.

### **Slide 2: Joseph and Jesus**

And, yet, we don't talk much about Joseph. And, given the patriarchal world that all of scripture lives in historically, it is refreshing to see Mary get all the attention. But, Joseph, now, he's kind of a silent blip, one that I think we should not overlook.

Although likely the most significant stepdad of all time, he is not the father of Jesus. Even on his saint day, he isn't even granted that title of Dad.

He is called the Guardian of Jesus. Quite frankly, can anyone really live up to the real father of this child? He doesn't even have a speaking part.

So, in these very few lines of Matthew's version of the Christmas story, we fortunately do get a little glimpse within the inner struggle that this important and humble servant goes through. And when best laid plans go bad, we can take a bit of advice from Joseph on how we might respond, even today in our modern problems. For, Joseph DID have a plan. And, that plan was suddenly, irrevocably changed, and not necessary in a good way; at least, not in a first century kind of good way.

### **Slide 3: Scandal**

There are a lot of things at play here in this very short Christmas version of the story. Even though we get none of this perspective of Joseph in Luke's Gospel, which is the more popular one we hear on Christmas Eve, there is a lot

packed in to just these eight verses.

First, let's talk about the well laid plans that Joseph first intended. As a carpenter, which in the first century meant that he might have been a stone mason or even worked with metals, he would have apprenticed with someone until such a time that he could carve out his own business. This would have taken years. And, as an upright, righteous Jew, Joseph would have worked hard enough to eventually have his own house, so that he may create a family. It was simply unheard of for any Jewish male to be unmarried if they could afford to.

In the process of selecting a wife, Joseph would have chosen to marry a woman from a family that also had an upstanding, righteous reputation. I'm afraid that at first glance, there is nothing romantic about this, at least from an historical standard.

And, after agreeing on the terms and bargaining with the family, a betrothal would

have been agreed upon for one year. But, in the first century, that meant that there would be no sexual relations until Mary came into his house after the completion of that year. And yet, in all other instances, she was considered to be his wife.

So far, so good. Except the writer of Matthew then tells us quite succinctly that “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” I’m assuming that this is the likely line that Mary gave him, because how else to you tell someone you are pregnant in the first century without your husband being the one who is the father. It suggests in today’s reading that she told him that very thing.

Put yourself now in Joseph’s shoes for a minute. How could you possibly believe Mary? And, if you did believe her, in what was a shame and honor culture of the first century, how would it look that your wife was pregnant before the year of your betrothal was up? If by some amazing chance that he even decided to claim this

child, the shame would be placed upon him, not to mention all the feelings of anger, betrayal, and embarrassment of engaging himself to a perceived unfaithful person? Certainly, a smart person would not believe her and instead believe that she was adulterous.

In all of his rights as the male in the first century, and according to the laws in the book of Deuteronomy, he could have had her stoned to death in public to save her family’s honor and his own. In fact, there are still places where these kind of horrific realities still take place, mostly in the Middle East and parts of Africa.

But, that’s not what Joseph does. He decides instead to do what was the most compassionate thing in those days: quietly divorcing her so that at least her life would be spared. Imagine the agonizing decision Joseph has to make and try to imagine it while not imposing our 21<sup>st</sup> century standards upon him. He was stuck. So, Joseph,

exhausted, agonizing on how to quietly dismiss Mary, falls into a sleep. And there, God helps him with the one thing that he was actually really feeling - fear. Joseph was afraid. We know that because the angel tells him not to be.

#### **Slide 4: Joseph facing sun**

*“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her IS from the Holy Spirit.”*

And yet, just like Mary, who no doubt had her own plans for life, Joseph was at a crossroads. Mary said yes. Will Joseph say so, too, waking from a dream that may seem less and less real as he goes about his day. No. Our Gospel writer gives us even more clues where it is written,

*“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”*

Joseph had an immediate faith response. He didn't hesitate. But, I can't help but wonder, did Joseph have a choice? What would

have happened, if Joseph had not said yes? What would have happened if he had carried out his plans to dismiss Mary, divorce her, to keep his honor intact and marry someone else? His intent was perfectly in accordance with the laws and expectations of an upright and righteous Jew of that day. We could debate the ethics of a first century patriarchy, but I think ultimately, first century problems are not the real concern in this story.

#### **Slide 5: broken pencil**

The real concern is how Joseph ultimately responds to the interruption of his best laid plans. He puts his trust in God, knowing nothing about what that will mean for his reputation, for his wife, for his family, for his future and what that will mean being a stepdad to the Messiah. He chose to trust in God that all will ultimately go according to plan, even though that plan wasn't his.

When are your best laid plans interrupted? And, like Joseph, where is God leading

you? Where is your “yes” to God? Does God really have something else planned for you than you would perhaps want?

#### **Slide 6: Advent 4**

On this final Sunday of Advent, we have been invited to struggle along with Joseph. Instead of rushing to the shepherds and angels, skipping to the end of the story of Christmas, why not tarry and meditate on this ordinary man’s willingness to enter fully into God’s plan, knowing that it would mean abandoning his own. It’s not yet Christmas. We have a few days yet left to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation.

*Wait. Ponder. Listen to how God may be speaking to you through this person known as the Guardian of our Lord.*

For it turns out that God is still in the business of redirecting, interrupting and changing our plans along our own journeys in life. Whether it is small adjustments, large shifts in location or vocation,

God calls us to seek and be part of bringing about the glorious Reign of God here and now, but also there and later. How will your best laid plans include God in this New Year that is dawning?

#### **Slide 7: Dream of Joseph**

What is God whispering to you today? What are the hopes in your hearts? What plan of yours is God really trying to disrupt for the better? Do not be afraid, God says, trust in the promises. You are called to bear Christ into the world – you, me, us; we all are asked to point to the One in whom there is light and salvation, to the babe carried all the way to Joseph’s home town, because an ordinary man dared to believe a dream.

Amen.