

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday of Advent

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Text: Matthew 1: 18-24

Title: “The Journey: Matthew—Mercy”

One of my favorite teachers in seminary was our professor of pastoral care. I was drawn to Paul's teaching and to his person because he was direct and honest about himself and his own life issues. One demonstration of that direct honesty came in a marriage counseling class he was teaching. During one class session he shared a painful period in his own life with the class. He said he was at the age at which he was looking forward to retirement. He and his wife, Ann, had been having conversations--making tentative long-range retirement plans--when she discovered she was pregnant.

Now this pregnancy was not in those long-range plans. All their children had been raised and out on their own. They had enjoyed their children. Parenting was not something they would have traded for anything, but they were also appreciating the freedom of the empty nest. This was an unwanted and unexpected intrusion into their life-plans.

It was an agonizing time for Paul especially. Could he possibly keep up with a young child at his age? If they allowed the pregnancy to continue, he would no doubt have to push retirement back several years, because they hadn't planned to put another child through college. The kid would be starting college right at the time he wanted to retire. He just didn't know if he could manage it. The options before them were several and Paul found himself thinking that no matter what choice they made it would be painful.

Most of us haven't faced that particular situation, but I expect all of us have faced situations in which the way forward was not clear and none of the choices before you seem very satisfying. Sometimes no matter what is decided it feels painful. When you are in a position of power and the decision before you is yours to make, how do you navigate when faced with such perplexing circumstances?

Let's look to the story of Joseph to see if we can find some help. This is how I hear the way the Gospel According to Matthew tells it. For all Joseph knew, Mary was pregnant with someone else's child. I can picture Joseph struggling with his situation. A man older than Mary, as some traditional stories have maintained. If you are in one of the Advent study groups you can discuss Joseph's age in more depth. He sits at a crude wooden table in a room of stone walls. An oil lamp, placed in the center of the table, dimly illuminates the room as the flame dances about, chasing its mildly acrid dark smoke to the thick wooden beams above. The lines on his forehead betray the deep struggle going on in his mind and heart. He sits, facing the lamp with hands folded, staring at the flame as he agonized.

1. If he honored the contract with her family, as is the expected result when one is betrothed or engaged, he would be denying the deep betrayal he felt within.

2. If he announced that he would not complete the transaction, a reason for breaking the contractual agreement would be needed. He would have to “out” Mary.

3. If he shared the reason for his change of heart and mind, Mary could-- according to the law--be killed at worst, publicly ridiculed at least. Though he felt betrayed, he could not bring himself to allow her to be hurt. He had feelings for her still.

The lamp flame grew short, dancing with less vigor. The smoke slowing it's run to the beams above. He'd worked it over in his mind a thousand times. Nothing he chose to do would be easy, but for his own inner integrity, he decided to meet her father and talk with him one-on-one. He would do it privately. He would do it quietly and respectfully. Maybe he could still preserve her by honoring her father and sharing his position and his feelings about the dreaded law that took life for tragic mistakes, about his feelings which feared public ridicule for her. Perhaps, her father would listen. . .

When he opened his eyes the next morning, they caught the rays of the sun beaming through the window onto the table of acacia wood. His head lay on his folded arms that rested on the table at which he fell asleep. The eyes, slow to wake, coaxed the lids to close and then open again in the rhythm of the morning awakening. His mind -- sharing the eyes' laziness -- reflected on the experience of the night as he kept his head comfortably laid on his arms.

As sometimes happens when life brings intense struggle, a dream had come to him in the night. It was a little foggy, but as his mind began to awaken, it became clearer. He remembered seeing himself standing, talking with someone. He wasn't quite certain why, but he knew it was someone who spoke for God. Have you ever had that kind of dream experience in which you know the identity of someone? Even though they don't appear to look like the person, nevertheless, you know that's who it is? Joseph somehow knew this person spoke for God. In the midst of this deeply personal struggle, the messenger says:

"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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

That's all he said, and he was gone. As Joseph rehearsed it in his mind over and over again, it became clear to him what it was God wanted him to do. The decision was his. He was in a position of power to make a choice. But as God's servant, he took this as a clear answer to his prayerful struggle, though he wasn't certain of the outcome.

A poet by the name of Shirley S. Stevens put Joseph's struggle in another way in a poem entitled, **THE CARPENTER'S ROOD:**

Carpenter I am
Craftsman, not creator of the wood,
Midwife to chairs and tables
I chafe not.
Husband I am
Why then so churlish a stepfather?

I dared deliver him
His swaddling clothes

I warmed against my chest.
I touched him first.
I cut the cord.
Hurt I felt
To hold this child
And know he was not mine.

Returning to the manger
I found Mary smiling,
"He is not mine either."

Under the rood star of Bethlehem
I knelt.
Not my will but thine be done
I granted
To my Father
And my Son.

Joseph ultimately chose mercy as the path that God wanted him to walk in regards to Mary. He had legal rights he could have exercised. The law was the law and he could have decided to use the law to preserve his rights, but God's grace trumps the law. At least it did so in this case. In Joseph's case his own feelings about things were not a reliable guide in making this decision. God called Joseph to trust God beyond his own feelings. And Joseph allowed his servant heart to guide him through whatever feelings that came to him as he wrestled with his situation. Joseph submitted his will to God's. God found a way to help Joseph understand that sometimes unexpected and unwanted interruptions can be opportunities to experience the birth of God in our lives.

My favorite professor, Paul, and his wife, Ann, had a similar experience. When Lynn and I met their son, Matthew--then 18 years old and headed for college--we found a bright, confident person who had given his parents great joy. Paul told us in that marriage counseling course: "Matthew has been the best thing that's ever happened to us. I wouldn't change our decision for the world. He changed our lives in ways I never would have thought possible."

They could have made a different choice, but somehow, some way, Paul's feelings did not provide the kind of wisdom needed for such a decision. Feelings are not always a reliable guide. In fact, as servants of God, sometimes expressing mercy requires us to overcome our feelings.

As you consider Joseph's story and his decision to follow God's leading to express mercy, are there places in your own life in which you are in a place of power that God is calling you to express God's mercy when your feelings might be leading you to consider other choices?

Maybe you've heard the same thing I have when it comes to our children and wrong doing: when it comes to other people's children who've done wrong, we want justice, but when it's our own that've done wrong, we plead for mercy. Alternatively, when it comes to other's doing wrong, we demand justice but when we have done wrong we hope for mercy. As servants of God, when we are in a position of power over someone else's fate, offering mercy gives birth to the presence of Christ in the world. May God's mercy be real for us all and the Christ child born in us today as we experience and express God's mercy.

Will you pray with me?

O Holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us,
Abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.