

## ***TAFRAID TO LOVE***

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December 15, 2019; Non-Lectionary Sermon

Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 1:18-25

***“...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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.’”***

– Matthew 1:20b

It sounds like a line from any one of a number of date movies: “Joseph: don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife.”

“Don’t be afraid... *to get married.*” It’s a theme of many a movie, sure enough. Aging, successful urban professional has an active social life, but he just can’t seem to settle down with any one woman. Some of the women he’s dated get together down at the Starbucks, and trade war stories about him: *That Joseph, you know, he’s a looker, but there’s just one problem with him. He’s got a bad case of “FTC”: failure to commit.*

In the Hollywood movie, what usually happens is the hero becomes involved with a woman he can’t stand, then they develop a love-hate relationship that finally transforms itself into real affection. They get engaged, but call the wedding off because of a misunderstanding. Then, at the last minute, everything gets cleared up, and the wedding comes off after all — but, in some unconventional Hollywood way. Sounds like a perfect date movie, right?

Is *that* what happened in Nazareth, long ago? Is *that* what the angel's talking about, when he says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife?" Does Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, demonstrate a failure to commit?

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Hardly. We know very little about Joseph — the biblical account is pretty sparse — but what it does tell us is that he was "a righteous man." In the Hebrew, the word is *tsaddiq*. A *tsaddiq* is a holy man, a man of very public virtue. If a *tsaddiq* made a business agreement with you, no written contract was necessary. His word was all you needed. If you were going away on long journey, and had to leave a sack of money behind for safekeeping, a *tsaddiq* was the man you wanted to look after it. You could count on every last shekel being there, upon your return.

As a *tsaddiq*, Joseph would hardly have been one to "play the field," to dither around trying to decide which woman he wanted to marry.

Nobody, back then, decided who they were going to marry, anyway. Marriages were arranged: a contract between the bride's and the groom's families. That sounds foreign to our American ears, I know, but that's how it was. In the best, most loving families, the children were probably consulted — *after* the

choice had already been made for them — so they might have an opportunity to voice any serious objections. But, this rarely happened. If you were a *tsaddiq*, a righteous person, you assumed your parents knew you best, and had chosen well for you. As for that near-stranger you were marrying, the two of you would learn to love each other, in time.

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There's an old tradition in the church that says Joseph was a good deal older than Mary, possibly even middle-aged. The Bible, in fact, says nothing about Joseph's age. This is pure speculation, based on the fact that Joseph walks right out of the biblical narrative, after that incident in the Temple when Jesus was 12. He must have died before Jesus reached adulthood, but that could have happened for any number of reasons, besides old age. More likely, Joseph was just a few years older than Mary — old enough to have established himself in his profession, and to have gained that reputation as a righteous man — but by no means did he belong to another generation.

So, what is it that leads a *tsaddiq* to overthrow his parents' wishes and abandon a marriage contract already made? Only the most dire of circumstances — and this, in fact, is exactly what led to Joseph's decision.

Joseph and Mary were in a period of betrothal — contracted to one another,

but not actually married yet. They did not live together. As a *tsaddiq*, Joseph knew he'd held up his end of the bargain, remaining faithful to his intended bride. But, the gradual thickening of Mary's abdomen told a different tale. It appeared — as much as he didn't want to believe it — that Mary had been unfaithful.

Had this really been true, the ramifications would have been huge. Because a marriage contract, in that culture, was an agreement not just between two people, but two families, Mary's family would have been publicly disgraced, and Joseph's would have had grounds to shun them. In a village culture, this could have resulted in a feud that went on for generations.

As for Mary, her situation was even more desperate. According to the law of Israel, expressed in the book of Deuteronomy, Mary could have been stoned to death for adultery. All it would have taken was a public denunciation by Joseph. The news of her pregnancy meant he held power of life or death over her. Had Joseph been a vengeful sort of person, he could have had vengeance a-plenty.

But, no. Joseph is a righteous man. That means his ideal is justice tempered with mercy. He would have found no joy at the sight of Mary's blood: only an abiding horror. And so, he resolves to do the truly righteous thing, the merciful thing. He will "dismiss her quietly" — break off the engagement, in other words. No public denunciation in the synagogue. Just a quiet conversation with the rabbi,

who will likely produce a few coins so Mary can go away for a time, to a distant village, and deliver her child in obscurity.

Should this happen, the life ahead for her is a grim one. She may never return to Nazareth: and, if she does, she'll probably eke out a hardscrabble livelihood as a household servant — for who will want to marry such a woman?

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It turns out, of course, that Joseph is more than merely a righteous man. He's also a man who pays attention to dreams. In that famous dream of his, an angel comes to him, explaining that Mary is with child by the Holy Spirit; that this child she is carrying is destined to be the salvation of Israel. "Do not be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary as your wife."

The fact that the angel mentions this at all shows that Joseph *is* afraid. What is it he could be afraid of?

First, he's probably afraid it could happen again. If Mary's really been unfaithful to him, who's to say she won't do it again? Will he ever be able to trust her?

Second, this child growing within her is not his — of that, he's certain. Will he ever be able to love it? Will he forever after look at the child's hair color, eyes, and physical build, and wonder which other man in the village is the real father?

Third, there's the matter of public disgrace. If it had happened that Mary and Joseph broke the celibacy of their betrothal, her pregnancy would have been an embarrassment, but no terrible scandal. Had Joseph been the biological father of the child, he would have had to endure some back-slapping, good-natured ridicule from the other men of the village. The marriage date would have been hastily moved up, and it might have been a very long time indeed before he could look Mary's father in the eye. But, they would have gotten over all that, eventually. Surely they wouldn't have been the first betrothed couple to endure such an ordeal.

But the child is *not* his. He knows it. How can he possibly go through with the marriage? How can he expect any good to come out of this terrible turn of events?

Until he hears the full story from the angel, Joseph is *afraid to love*. He's afraid the love he's begun to feel for Mary isn't strong enough to triumph over the fear, the anger, the embarrassment. For what *is* love, anyway, but a weak, pathetic sentiment? Better to hide such a love away. Better to save it for someone more worthy. Better to take refuge in the law, instead.

The law will never let you down the way a lover will. Cold, reliable, unchanging: that's the law. Fickle human relationships may change, but the law of

God is always and everywhere the same.

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Let me tell you something, though, about righteousness. Righteousness won't keep you warm at night. It won't take care of you when you're sick. It won't laugh with you, nor cry with you, nor listen to your dreams. When you look at your partner, or your spouse, or your family member, or your good friend, and you see all those flaws and imperfections — so familiar to you that you can tote them up with ease — it may make you feel righteous, for a moment. But, it will do nothing to help you feel loved.

I know some marriages — maybe you do, too — that are so wrapped up in a quest for righteousness that the couple has left love behind them in the dust. These are the relationships where each partner is contending to be “holier than thou.” They bicker constantly, mostly about who's right and who's wrong. There's plenty of scorekeeping that goes on in that kind of marriage (*You think **you** feel hurt; well, what about all those times when you made **me** feel even worse?*).

There are other marriages when victory in the righteousness competition has long since been claimed by *one* of the partners. Usually this is a relationship in which one partner has committed some terrible sin — an affair, perhaps; or some financial carelessness; or maybe an addiction to drugs or alcohol or gambling. The

couple has dealt with the situation, after a fashion. They've put the immediate pain behind them. But, there's been precious little forgiveness. One partner feels deeply wounded, and the other just feels grateful the marriage didn't collapse. The two have built righteousness up as a dividing-wall between them. As for love, it's hard for that fragile flower to flourish, in the shadow formed by such an imposing wall.

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For me, that line Matthew uses to describe Joseph is so telling. It sums up everything we need to know about him: "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." We usually think of righteousness as a good thing, an honorable thing: but there are times when it can take on a life of its own, edging out another value like love, which — at the end of the day — is of course even more important. For which is of greater value in a human relationship: always to be right, or always to offer love and to be loved? Put the question like that — as an abstract proposition — and most of us would choose love every time.

Ironic, isn't it? Because how often do we do just the opposite in our own intimate relationships? Joseph very nearly did the same in his relationship with Mary. It took a visit by an angel of the Lord to talk him out of it!

When couples come in for marriage counseling, they almost always begin from a standpoint of righteousness. “Let me tell you what my partner’s done, Pastor, and let me tell you what I’ve done. Then, you tell us which one of us is right!” If such a marriage is going to have any chance of surviving, the couple must move on, eventually, from the pursuit of righteousness to the pursuit of love: because no marriage was ever saved by one partner proving to be more righteous than the other. The one and only thing that saves our intimate relationships — that makes them worth cherishing and preserving — is love.

Joseph’s courageous decision to choose Mary — despite the visible roundness of her belly that all the world can see — is a triumph of love over righteousness. “Joseph, being a righteous man... planned to dismiss her quietly.” Joseph, being a loving man, abandoned that idea, and decided to accept her anyway, just as she was — and to raise that baby as though he were his own.

Where would we all have ended up, I wonder, had Joseph taken the first choice?

Let’s not even think about it.

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Christmas is coming soon: a time of great excitement, for many of us. Yet, the secular Christmas holiday can also be a time of significant stress. It’s a season

of so many expectations. We demand so much of each other, this time of year. We look to others to make us happy: to say just the right thing, to buy the perfect gift, to create gauzy memories for the future. But is it really in the *receiving* of such perks that true joy is found? Of course not. It's only in the act of giving to each other, of sacrificing for each other, that any of us discover true joy.

One of the most beloved Christmas stories of all time is "The Gift of the Magi," written by the American short-story writer, O. Henry. You may remember the details. It used to be on the reading list of every junior-high English class. I hope it still is today.

It's a story about a young couple, Jim and Della, preparing to celebrate Christmas in old New York, about a hundred years ago. Each one's determined to find the one, perfect gift that will make the other happy. The only problem is, this couple has very little money.

Jim's most prized possession is a pocket watch he inherited from his father. But alas, the watch has no chain. Della is determined to buy her husband a fine watch-chain, so when he takes the family heirloom out of his vest pocket to check the time, he can feel proud.

As for Della, she has *her* eye set on a pair of elegant, tortoise-shell combs she saw in a department-store window. Her most prized possession is her

beautiful, long hair, and wouldn't those combs show it off to the best advantage?

If you've read the story, then you know what happens. Jim takes his gold watch and sells it, so he can have enough money to buy his wife the combs. As for Della, she cuts off her beautiful hair and sells it to a wigmaker, so she can buy her husband the watch-chain. On Christmas Day, they exchange two gifts that have been rendered absurdly and utterly useless by the extravagant sacrifice each one has made.

The story ends with Jim and Della reveling in the love they share: love so great it's led them to sacrifice their most cherished possessions for the good of the other.

There's a certain sadness to the story, of course, as we consider what each one has lost. Yet, there's also an abiding sense of joy, as we realize it wasn't about the gifts at all. Rather, it was about the giving.

Here's how O. Henry finishes his quirky, ironic tale:

**“The magi, as you know, were wise men — wonderfully wise men — who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give**

**and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”**

[ [http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/Gift\\_of\\_the\\_Magi.html](http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/Gift_of_the_Magi.html) ]

In that sense, I suppose Joseph was one of the magi, too. For he gave up his most precious possession: his righteousness, his reputation as a *tsaddiq*, for the sake of his beloved Mary, and of the child in her womb.

May this Christmas be, for you and for me, a time of giving in just that way: a time for giving the precious, priceless gift of love.

Let us pray:

**Lord, it has been said that “love came down at Christmas.”  
All we ask is that love come down to us again, this holiday:  
not only as something we receive,  
but as something we give:  
wholly, unreservedly, recklessly, faithfully.  
In the name of Jesus we ask it. Amen.**

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