

Peace for Our Hearts • Matthew 1:18-25

The first candle of the Advent wreath is called “Hope”. After hope comes “Peace”. Peace is something wonderful. It is much more than the absence of conflict. It is the presence of great calm, prosperity and good.

In the great depths of the oceans the pressure is enough to crush a submarine like an empty Coke can. In order to explore the ocean depths oceanographers have built bathyspheres, miniature submarines constructed out of steel plates that are several inches thick. Their thick “skins” stop the crushing pressure on the outside from getting to the scientists on the inside.

When these bathyspheres are settled on the ocean floor and their lights are turned on for exploration, the scientists see fish—fish with very thin skins. Why don’t they implode? Those fish have on the inside an equal and opposite pressure to that which is on the outside. Therefore, they are able to swim about freely and easily where we would be destroyed.

That is what peace is like. Peace is not the absence of pressure and conflict around us. It is an equal and opposite pressure on the inside that keeps the stresses and pressures on the outside from crushing us.

Joseph was a man under pressure. The stress of his circumstances was enough to take his breath away. He felt as if he would be crushed. His story is part of the Christmas story in Matthew 1:18: *“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”*

To understand what was going on we need to understand some of the marriage customs in first century Israel. Their wedding and marriage customs were different from ours. Couples were engaged as the result of arrangements made by their parents.

Often professional matchmakers were involved, sort of an ancient version of our modern internet dating services. In that first century society marriage was considered far too important to be left up to the couple to decide. Parents made the decision for their children.

Since the decision was often made when they were still children, the engagement could last for many years. During this time the boy and girl could be engaged to someone they had never met or, in fact, had never even seen.

Years later the engagement became a betrothal, a formal process that was considered legally binding. It was closer to what we today call an engagement. It lasted for a year. During that time the couple referred to one another as “husband” and “wife” even though they did not live together.

Between the engagement and the betrothal there was an opportunity to opt out, although there was huge social pressure to stay in the relationship. Once the couple was betrothed the only way to break the relationship was legal divorce.

At the end of the year-long betrothal came the wedding and with the wedding came a huge community-based reception that could last as long as a week as family and friends partied together. It was only after the wedding and the reception that the couple moved in together and sexually consummated their relationship.

It was during this one-year betrothal period that

Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant. We are never told how he found out. Perhaps it was Mary herself who told him. Or maybe it was street gossip that leaked out of her home and eventually came to Joseph’s ears.

When Joseph finally found out that the woman he was to marry was going to have a baby his life caved in. It seemed obvious to him what had hap-

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pened. He had assumed that she loved him. He had assumed she was a virgin. He had assumed she was a completely different kind of woman than he now knew her to be. How do you describe the churning mixture of love, disappointment and anger? He was hurt and humiliated and angry. But he still loved her and wanted her.

In a small town like theirs everyone would soon know. Maybe everyone already knew. They probably even knew the other guy's name.

He must have wondered how to respond. Should he put his fist through a wall, go out and get drunk, lie in his bed and cry or leave town and never show his face again? Gone forever were his dreams of a great wedding and happy reception and living happily ever after.

When caught by surprise, when crushed by circumstances, when deeply disappointed, it is hard to imagine that even God himself could ever make life good again. Perhaps you have been where Joseph was. Maybe you are there right now. It feels like someone has hit you in the stomach with a baseball bat. It seems like circumstances are crushing you in. Life is caving in.

Joseph was a good man. He wanted to do the right thing. Not all of us are like that. Some of us would want to get even. Some of us would want to apply the ancient code of retribution – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We want revenge. But not Joseph! *“Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”* (Matthew 1:19)

Joseph had concern and compassion for the woman he thought had so cruelly betrayed him. From the information he had she was immoral, unfaithful and, under Hebrew law, she had committed a capital crime and could be stoned to death. In his wildest imagination Joseph could not have imagined any kind of acceptable explanation for her pregnancy. Yet he wanted to protect her from embarrassment, from harassment and from public disgrace.

I admire Joseph. I would like to be like him for it seems to me that the more common response to such a situation would be to criticize and condemn his wife-to-be. You've heard the response of those who have been wronged. Maybe you're read the

divorce papers. You have been around those who have been hurt. Rarely is there a lot of love or compassion or generosity.

Joseph was not a Christian because there was not yet a Christ but he certainly was “Christian” in his response to the disaster of his life. First in his mind and priorities was to do what was right, not to retaliate or to compensate for his own injury. No wonder that out of a whole generation of men God chose Joseph to be the human father to raise his Son on earth.

May we all be like Joseph. May you and I want to do the right thing when we are cheated, criticized, attacked or betrayed. The world is full of people who get aggressive, defensive and self-centered and who see others as the enemy to be defeated. Blessed are those who want to do what is right no matter how hard that might be.

Joseph had pretty much made up his mind what was the right thing to do. He would initiate a divorce, but he would do it in a decent way, privately and quietly. He would not say anything ill about Mary. He would simply carry the hurt in his heart, but he would treat her with dignity and respect whether she deserved it or not. This would free her to marry the father of her child. Joseph would carry his heartbreak alone for the rest of his life.

I wonder if he cried himself to sleep that night. I wonder if he forced himself to sob quietly so no one else would hear or know. After all, if he was like most men in that generation in Israel he did not live alone. That was a luxury very few had. Most likely he lived in a house with an extended family, so the sobs had to be silent. He may have tried to stay awake, thinking that would prolong the night, for when the sun rose it meant he had to do what he had decided to do. But sleep crept up on him and finally he dozed off and . . .

. . . an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

When he awakened the next morning Joseph must have thought this was the strangest dream he

had ever had. Perhaps he laughed for the first time in days at the amazing ingenuity of the human mind to rationalize absolutely anything if we want it badly enough. This dream was so farfetched that he couldn't help but wonder if it was actually real and true. How could Joseph know that he was the focal point of the fulfillment of an ancient prediction made by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years earlier? Matthew 1:22-23 tells us:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

Usually I'm skeptical when people tell me they had a dream from God and God told them something directly. I usually want to ask what they had for dinner the night before or what they have been smoking. Yet, I know that God uses a variety of methods and messengers to communicate his truth. So, if Joseph had come to me the next morning and asked whether or not to believe the dream, I would say yes. Not because of the content of the dream and not because of the message but because Joseph was a righteous man who wanted to do what was right. He wasn't the kind of man who chased after wacky visions. He was a solid, steadfast, predictable, godly man. I would say, "Joseph, I believe you just heard a message from God!"

But it raises a question of what I would do if I faced Joseph's stress and turmoil and wanted direction from God. I'm sure I would pray like I had never prayed before in my life. And I would read the Bible and seek to there find perspective and wisdom from God. I would seek the counsel of a few wise and godly friends. And, I would trust God to get his message to me any way he wanted to communicate it. I certainly wouldn't demand of God an angelic appearance or a dream like Joseph had because the whole point is that the message was from God. It wasn't the method God used that was important.

When Joseph awakened the next morning he faced one of the most important decisions of his entire life. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the

angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." That was not an easy thing to do. It would have been easier to get the divorce, forget about Mary and find another wife in town. To marry Mary meant living with rumors and whispers about their marriage for the rest of his life. It meant raising a child who was not his own. It meant future years with a long list of unanswered questions. But he did it because it was the right thing to do, not because it was the easy thing.

Remember, Joseph was a righteous man. Obeying God and doing what was right was far more important to him than taking the easy path. He demonstrated something that millions of Christians have learned in every generation since Joseph woke up that next morning—that the right way is often the hard way. Years later, it was Jesus who said in Matthew 7:13-14:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Too often we choose what is wrong and easy. If things don't work out well in short order we assume that we made a terrible mistake. Let's learn from Joseph—do what is right whether it turns out easy or not.

It was not only the emotional strain and social pressure, for Joseph it was also sexual deprivation. It is so interesting that the Bible would mention this in telling the Christmas story. It seems to be very private and intimate information that the rest of us do not need to know. To those of us in the 21st century it is particularly interesting because our

society has taught us that sexual satisfaction is virtually a human right. Many insist that sex must precede marriage or go outside marriage. If there is a desire, no matter how il-

licit, it should be satisfied regardless of the cost or consequences.

Joseph was willing to postpone a sexual relationship he had every right to exercise. He waited because he thought it was the right thing to do. He

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waited because he believed Mary when she said she was a virgin. He waited so that when Jesus was born there would be no doubt that he had been miraculously conceived. He put God's plan and Jesus' reputation ahead of his own personal desires. Matthew 1:25 tells us that Joseph "had no union with (Mary) until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

I could get stressed out just thinking about Joseph's situation. Everything was going along fine and then his engagement was shattered by betrayal. He was hurt and perhaps angry. Then he had a supposedly supernatural dream and there were decisions to make, a hurry-up wedding, sexual abstinence, the birth of a baby . . . and that was only the beginning. It was enough to churn the soul and wreck the life of any man. Yet, I sense a settledness and peace about Joseph that I admire and desire. I want to know how he did it. Where did Joseph get this peace on the inside while he was swirled by a tornado on the outside?

The answer is in the baby. The coming of Jesus into his life settled his soul. God showed him the right way and he chose to follow it. His formula is for us all: When life caves in, choose to do what is right. Listen to the voice of God and when you wake up and actually decide what to do, do what God wants, no matter what the price. You, too, will experience the peace of God that comes with Jesus.

Gordon MacDonald is a popular author and speaker. He and I have known each other most of our lives. Our fathers were good friends before we were born.

Following a lecture Gordon gave he was approached by a Nigerian woman who was a physician on the staff of a large American teaching hospital. She introduced herself with a very common American name. Gordon asked her, "What is your African name?" She replied with a series of syllables that had an unfamiliar although musical sound to them. He asked her, "What does your African name mean?"

She explained that her name means "Child who takes the anger away." Then she told her story. Her parents had been very much in love, but their par-

ents forbid them to marry. Defying their families' opinions they married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. She continued:

Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when my grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave to me.

The same can be said about another name. He is the child who settles the tumultuous heart. He heals the tormented soul. He equalizes the pressure on the inside so we don't implode from the outside. He brings the alienated together. He is the child who takes the anger away. He is the one who brings peace . . . and his name is Jesus!

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