

“A RIGHTEOUS MAN WITH A PLAN”

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

I can't say I admire Joseph.

Is this what you would call a “righteous” man?

We are told that, since he was righteous, because he was a good man, of course he wouldn't subject Mary to the public disgrace she had coming to her. He was willing to forego the whole process of shaming her. He really cared about her! So he did only what he really had to do: dismiss her. But he did it . . . quietly. So no one would know . . . that he had been injured by Mary.

“Being a righteous man, he planned to dismiss her quietly.”

But here's my problem. If he was such a righteous man, if he was concerned about Mary, why wouldn't he plan a way to marry her and help cover her disgrace? Better yet, why wouldn't he voluntarily accept the role of wrongdoer, and allow her to be considered the victim? By dismissing her, he would consign her to a lifetime of disgrace and poverty, as a lonely unwed mother without a providing and protecting husband.

Did Joseph even consider that? I guess not. Because, after all, he was righteous.

I just don't know how righteous it was for Joseph to consider only how privately he could dismiss her. He gets no points with me.

The Gospel of Matthew has a lot to say about being a good or righteous person. The first place the word “righteous” appears, it is applied to a man who plans to draw a cloak of respectability over himself while

dismissing—injuring—someone he supposedly cares about.

After Jesus managed to get born, after Joseph abandoned his own plan and went along with God's plan, Jesus would have a lot to say about that kind of righteousness. Jesus had a word for it: “hypocrisy.”

When people wear a mask of righteousness to conceal their inner reality.

Jesus saw hypocrites everywhere. He once told a man, frankly, “No one is good but God alone.” All around him people were scheming, as Joseph himself had once schemed, how they could preserve the look of respectability.

Is it any different today?

When it comes to righteousness, don't we all care a lot more about maintaining our own, rather than defending that of others? Would we really be so different from Joseph, if we were in his situation?

If Joseph was a righteous man, it was a shabby sort of goodness. I would like to have something better than that for myself. Maybe we should see where this story goes!

Notice how the angel greeted Joseph: “Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid . . .”

Why did he say that? Joseph wasn't afraid. He was just a righteous man with a plan.

But the angel saw through it. Underneath the veneer of respectability, hidden under the plan he had concocted for his future and Mary's, lay fear. He was indeed afraid to marry Mary. That was the truth.

What was he afraid of?

Falling. And breaking.

He was afraid of the kind of fall that cometh after pride, which goeth before a fall. When you fall, people look at you differently. They feel sorry for you. They pity you. They talk about you.

“Poor Joseph. He was such a good man. Now, look at him.”

He was afraid of that. He was afraid of earning some of the contempt people reserve for people who are worse people than they are. He was afraid of deserving the judgment of other people, and of God.

Yes, Joseph was afraid.

And there was the real problem. He couldn't love Mary in this tricky situation, because first you have to take care of yourself, and losing your goodness can destroy a person. Joseph had to take care of number one.

Some righteousness that was!

But the angel told Joseph not to be afraid!

Why? Because the angel had thought of a better plan to save his reputation?

No. Because of the good news which is the center of this story, and the center of the gospel of Matthew. Jesus is coming to take care of the world by taking care of our sin and our fear.

Through the forgiveness of our sins, Jesus would take away our hypocrisy blanket and throw over us a robe of righteousness which would free us to serve God as we are, without fear of falling, thinking instead only of the needs of others.

Jesus would make it possible for someone in Joseph's identical situation to marry Mary because that was what Mary needed and he loved Mary.

Instead of spending our days planning how to be righteous, we can spend all day looking at the people around us and thinking about how we can best serve them, for the love of God. Because God will take care of the righteousness part, if we only trust him

to do so. Because that is why he sent his Son to be born of Mary in the first place.

This is the real story of Matthew 1:18-25: We don't have to save ourselves from our sins any more, because Jesus has come to do that.

Don't be distracted by the curious story of how Jesus got born. Notice instead the radical transition from one sort of righteousness to another. From goodness that is just a plot we hatch, to goodness that is born in a manger and bestowed as a gift.

That is the story of Matthew which we shall pursue all year (until next Advent when we start reading the Gospel of Mark). This year's gospel readings, except for a few from John, will be taken from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus will lay bare the hypocrisy of many people, and he will give the gift of righteousness to those who are willing to receive the forgiveness of sins. Finally, he will die for us to be righteous, and he will send a gospel into the whole world.

This is the “Emmanuel Effect.” “Emmanuel” means “God is with us.” Don't think of it just as “God is close by.” That can be scary. Think of it as “God is on our side now.” Instead of God being the one who keeps us busy acting good, God becomes—to us who believe in Emmanuel—the one who keeps us busy loving others.

This is how to use the “Emmanuel Effect”: You say to yourself in the morning, or in any situation, “Since God is with us and since I am righteous for the sake of his Son Jesus, what shall I do for those I see today?”

Before I quit, I want to say something nice about Joseph. I don't want to make him just a whipping boy. Let's remember him not for his Plan B—how to escape his predicament—but for being first to use the Emmanuel Effect. The angel said, “Do not be afraid; trust in God and be a servant to God! Marry Mary!” And he did!

Amen.