

Welcome

Third Sunday of Advent

Character Emphasis: Joseph and Mary

Scripture Text: Matt. 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38

Lesson Synopsis: In this lesson, Mary and Joseph will be offered as examples of what it means to welcome God's reign into our lives. Class participants will first be challenged to understand the scandal of Mary's and Joseph's situation and then to see the cost to both in offering themselves in obedience. The lesson will end by offering three ways that Mary and Joseph teach us to welcome God's reign into our lives.

Digging In

Notes on Marriageⁱ

To better understand the characters of Joseph and Mary, it will be helpful to first understand the situation in which they find themselves in the Christmas story. Matt. 1:18 states, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit." To ancient ears, this brief summary would have been packed with content that is lost on readers of the same story today.

To begin, early hearers would probably have assumed that Joseph and Mary were young. Betrothals in this culture often took place when men were around eighteen or twenty years of age and women were twelve or fourteen. For men, who assumed adult responsibilities at around age thirteen, marrying in their late teens meant that they had had time to become financially stable and were therefore able to support a family. For women, betrothals came at around the age of puberty. While these were not set rules for all betrothals, they were the custom of the day, and hearers would probably have assumed that Joseph and Mary were in their teens or slightly older.

Beyond assumptions of age, ancient hearers would also have understood quickly that Joseph and Mary had entered into a serious relationship. To be pledged in marriage, or betrothed, in this time was similar to today's practice of engagement but carried much greater weight. Today, couples will announce their intention to marry through an engagement that can be broken by either party. While breaking a modern engagement is certainly emotionally difficult, doing so carries no legal consequences or difficulties. Like modern engagement, Joseph's and Mary's betrothal signaled their

intent to marry, this having been arranged by their fathers. Unlike modern engagement, betrothal had the legal force of marriage. While couples would not live together or consummate their relationship until a year after becoming betrothed, they were nevertheless considered as good as married. So binding was betrothal in this culture that should a man die during the betrothal year (before the marriage), his fiancé would be considered a widow. More than this, breaking an engagement required nothing less than divorce.

Having the serious nature of Mary's and Joseph's betrothal in mind, ancient hearers would also have automatically sensed the gravity of Mary's pregnancy. While Matthew is clear in stating that the Holy Spirit caused Mary's pregnancy, Joseph is not yet privy to this news and assumes that she has cheated on him. Here the circumstance is very similar to a modern engagement – pregnancy signals unfaithfulness and stands as grounds for terminating the relationship. More than this, assumed unfaithfulness brings shame on both parties, with the woman being viewed as unfaithful and the man being seen as somehow inadequate. In Mary's and Joseph's culture, though, the gravity of unfaithfulness was reinforced by stricter social mores and legal ramifications tied to betrothal. More than only painting her as unfaithful, Mary's pregnancy would have made her an adulteress in the sight of her culture while also exposing her to severe consequences for her assumed infidelity (these to be discussed below). With this background information in mind, we can now turn our gaze on Joseph and Mary, both of whom prove to be exemplary characters when faced with difficulty.

Joseph (Matt. 1:18-25)

As stated above, Joseph finds himself in a difficult and unwanted situation when he discovers Mary's pregnancy. Knowing that he is not the father and not yet having been told of the Spirit's involvement, Joseph is left to assume that Mary has been unfaithful to him and has therefore brought him shame. It is in this moment, precisely when many would have excused him for reacting badly, that Joseph serves as a paradigm of righteousness.

Joseph's righteousness is seen first in his faithfulness to the law regarding divorce. As Craig Keener explains, "In contrast to most of modern Western culture, Joseph lived in a society where he had no option of giving Mary a second chance, even if he wanted to ... Jewish, Greek, and Roman law all demanded that a man divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery."ⁱⁱ Joseph, then, is dedicated to the law in his intent to divorce Mary.

At the same time, Joseph's righteousness is not defined only by his law observance. Instead, "Joseph, being a righteous man *and unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace*, planned to dismiss her *quietly*" (Matt. 1:19, NRSV; emphasis added). While the law called for divorce in this situation, it gave Joseph options in how to pursue it. On one hand, Joseph could divorce Mary by taking her to court, thereby making the

proceedings public and ensuring that Mary face the maximum consequences for her assumed infidelity. Should Joseph have chosen this course, he could have impounded Mary's dowry and possibly recovered any bride price that had been paid to Mary's father.ⁱⁱⁱ This course of action would also have ensured that Mary and her family incurred the maximum amount of shame for her perceived offense. On the other hand, Joseph could divorce Mary quietly by presenting her with a certificate of divorce in the presence of two or three witnesses.^{iv} This path precluded any financial recompense and subjected Mary to as little shame as possible. When faced with these two options, Joseph chose the latter. Rather than exacting revenge through publicly disgracing his betrothed, Joseph compassionately chose to divorce her quietly. In this, Joseph displays not only righteousness, but *righteousness teamed with mercy*. Serving as an example, Joseph shows us the kind of righteousness that God desires.^v

In a display of righteous mercy, Joseph has chosen to divorce Mary quietly. After making this decision, though, he is visited by an angel in a dream that changes his trajectory. Instructed by the angel not to fear marrying Mary and assured that her pregnancy is the work of the Holy Spirit, Joseph forsakes his plans of divorce and immediately follows through with the marriage. Importantly, this was a costly course to follow. If Joseph knew of Mary's pregnancy, then others probably did as well. In failing to divorce her and hurrying the marriage in response to the dream, Joseph sets himself up to be mistaken as the father. As Keener states, "Because Joseph alone received this revelation [the dream], outsiders in the story world would still think that he had gotten Mary pregnant before the wedding. He would remain an object of shame in a society dominated by the value of honor. Joseph's obedience to God cost him the right to value his own reputation."^{vi} In a striking show of obedience, a righteous man forfeits his righteous standing in society in order to obey the call of God.

In Joseph we see a model of welcome. He welcomes God's reign into his life by embracing the principles of righteousness and mercy. This is seen in his choice to quietly divorce Mary and shows a life that is open to God's way even in difficult circumstances. Joseph's welcome moves a step further, though, when he goes through with the marriage in obedience to the dream. At great cost to his own reputation, Joseph welcomes Mary and her son-to-be into his life, and in doing so, we see him once again welcoming the reign of God.

Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

If Mary's pregnancy made things hard on Joseph, the same must certainly have been true for Mary! In looking at Joseph's options for divorce, we have seen the danger to which Mary is exposed. The worst case scenario is that she be dragged into court, divorced, labeled an adulteress, lose her dowry, and become an object of public shame. Even if Joseph had followed through with his more compassionate plan to divorce her quietly, Mary still would have found herself in difficult straights. Small towns can be

hotbeds of gossip, and this certainly would have been the case even with a quiet divorce. Mary could only have hidden her pregnancy for so long before she began to show and people began to suspect the reason for her broken betrothal. Regardless of Joseph's compassion, Mary would have been subject to shame. More than this, her prospects at marriage would have dipped sharply due to her perceived infidelity. To remain unmarried would have been "a horrible fate in an economically male-centered society where a woman's honor depended on her status vis-à-vis a man."^{vii} If Joseph finds himself in difficulty, Mary finds herself in nothing short of a crisis!

With all of this in mind, imagine Mary's surprise when she receives a visit from the angel Gabriel, who tells her that she will become pregnant through the work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:28-33). So much must have been running through her mind. She asks directly about the practical possibility of a virgin conceiving (1:34), but she must have had many more concerns than just this! What will Joseph think? How will he react? What will the townspeople say? If Joseph divorces her, what will her future look like? What about the shame that this news will bring on herself and her family? Here we see a young woman facing the loss of her fiancé, her reputation, and her future. Yet Mary does not panic, nor does she offer objections. Even in asking how a virgin can conceive, she only asks a question rather than protesting Gabriel's words. Then, after hearing of the miraculous nature of the conception, Mary offers astounding words of faith and service: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled" (1:38). No objections. No questions about how all of this will work out. No bartering for a guarantee of continued good standing in the community. Just a simple statement of acceptance and service. In this, Mary, like Joseph, welcomes the reign of God into her life regardless of its cost and becomes an exemplar of faith.

Application

Perhaps the best place to begin applying the stories of Mary and Joseph to our lives is with the concept of favor. When the angel Gabriel visits Mary, he does so with this greeting: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). Later, Gabriel will again affirm that Mary has "found favor with God" (1:29). While we in Christian circles are familiar with the idea of God's favor, we may be surprised to see it used here. For us, favor is many times connected to material blessings – God's favor is with those who are well off. For Mary, though, favor leads to responsibility. Because she is favored by God, she will bear and raise the Messiah. Because she is favored by God, she has been given a part to play in God's plan of salvation. While the idea of favor is not used in Matthew's telling of Joseph's side of the story, it is not a stretch to apply the same idea to him.

As we have seen, Joseph's and Mary's part in God's plan is not easy. For Mary, receiving God's favor means accepting a great deal of uncertainty. All she knows from her conversation with Gabriel is that she will miraculously conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit. Beyond this, she is left in the dark. She is given no guarantees concerning Joseph's reaction to the pregnancy. In giving her faithful reply, "May your word to me be fulfilled," Mary opens herself to the possibility of shame and disgrace.

For Joseph, receiving God's favor means obedience to a difficult command. If Joseph knows about Mary's pregnancy, then others probably do as well. In heeding the word of the angel in his dream, Joseph makes himself look like the father. As Keener has explained, "While his town would not have viewed a betrothed couple's intercourse as seriously as adultery ... townspeople would have questioned the moral commitment of both parties."^{viii} As stated above, a righteous man is giving up his righteous standing because he values obedience over reputation. It seems that God's favor can be costly.

As we look at the costly favor granted to Mary and Joseph, we can ponder the kind of favor that we seek from God. While it is not a bad thing to seek the benefits of God's favor, we fall short if our prayers end there. Are we bold enough to pray for the favor of being included in God's plan of redemption? Ultimately, all Christians have been favored in this way. Each of us has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve Christ's Church, and we can all claim the title of ambassadors. Are we exercising our gifts? Are we walking as good ambassadors in the world? We might call these activities the baseline of God's favor – all Christians enjoy these roles in God's plan of redemption. If we are already seeking to embrace our roles as servants and ambassadors, we might consider exercising the boldness of Mary. Perhaps it is time for us to offer ourselves more fully as God's servants, saying, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." As we embrace our places in God's plan and offer ourselves ever more fully to his service, we, like Mary and Joseph, welcome God's reign into our lives.

Beyond the favor mentioned in Luke's account of Mary, we can also consider the example of Joseph's righteousness. It is important here to see that Joseph welcomed God's reign *before* he received special instructions concerning Mary and Jesus. Long before he became the adoptive father of the Son of God, Joseph was God's man in his commitment to righteousness and mercy. Thus, when he found himself in the hard situation of suspecting his betrothed of being unfaithful, Joseph chose the better path of divorcing Mary quietly. In this, we see that *pleasing God and welcoming his reign do not require extraordinary circumstances or heavenly visitations*. Joseph was a man committed to mercifully living by God's law in the everyday parts of life.

Often when we think of God's will for our lives, we think of the big decisions – a new job, a new place to live, the possibility of marriage, whether or not to pursue an unexpected opportunity. These are moments when we would like for Gabriel to visit us in a dream to tell us what to do. While it is certainly good to seek God's will in the

big decisions of our lives, Joseph shows us that we can be committed to God's will in the rest of life as well. Indeed, this is the challenge of discipleship. Jesus calls us unabashedly to take up our crosses daily and follow him (Luke 9:23). This entails 24/7 commitment to Jesus' teachings, and it is this commitment that makes up the bulk of following Jesus. Yes, there are significant moments when we want and need divine guidance, but our calling moves far beyond the "big" moments in our lives. Like Joseph, we are called to commit ourselves to mercifully following God's law. As Christians, we give pride of place to the interpretation of the law provided by Jesus (as found, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7). As we commit ourselves following Jesus daily, we consistently and constantly welcome God's reign into our lives.

As we conclude our reflections on Mary and Joseph, perhaps we can identify three ways in which we welcome God's reign into our lives. First, like Joseph, we commit ourselves to daily living by what we know of God's law. In this, righteousness and mercy must intermingle. Second, we ask to experience God's favor by being caught up into God's redemptive plan. In this, we echo the words of Mary, "I am your servant. Let it be to me as you have said." Third, we honor those moments when God asks something special of us. Both Mary and Joseph responded in obedience when given the awesome responsibility of bearing and raising the Messiah. We can seek to respond in the same way when we feel God leading us to new areas of service.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "What is your favorite Christmas gift?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Introduction: Remind the class of December's Advent focus. Then let them know that today's lesson will focus on the Advent theme of Welcome by focusing on the characters of Mary and Joseph.

Appreciating the Scandal:

- **Question:** Ask participants to imagine an engaged couple. What would they think if the woman became pregnant before the wedding?
- **Question:** Ask how they think the woman's fiancé would react if he were not the father.
- **Question:** Ask how the girl would be perceived by the people in her town if her fiancé was not the father. How would she be treated?

- **Question:** Ask participants what they would think if the woman became pregnant and her fiancé moved the wedding date up? How would the couple be treated by the people in their town?
- **Explain:** While we don't often think of the Christmas story as scandalous, much of what we just talked about was taking place.

Joseph:

- **Scripture Passage:** Ask a class member to read Matt. 1:18-19.
 - **Question:** Ask participants why Joseph is planning to divorce Mary (or put her away).
 - **Explain:** Take a moment to explain how betrothals worked in this culture and time and why divorce was required. (See the "Notes on Marriage" section for this information.)
 - **Question:** Ask participants what they think it meant for Joseph to divorce Mary *quietly*.
 - **Explain:** Explain that while the law required Joseph to divorce Mary, it gave him options on how to do so and that Joseph chose the most merciful option. (See the "Joseph" section above.) In this, Joseph gives us an example of the kind of righteousness that pleases God: *righteousness teamed with mercy*.
- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read Matt. 1:20-23.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to summarize Gabriel's message to Joseph.
 - **Question:** Ask if class members think that obedience to this message would have been easy. What will people think if Joseph marries his pregnant fiancé?
- **Scripture Passage:** Have a class member read Matt. 1:24-25.
 - **Question:** Ask class members to summarize Joseph's response to his dream. Note that his obedience was immediate. In effect, Joseph moved up his wedding date.
 - **Question:** Ask what this might have cost Joseph.
- **Explain:** Explain that Joseph shows two ways that we can welcome God into our lives.
 - First, he was committed to righteousness and mercy in everyday life. Even when faced with the perceived betrayal of his betrothed, he acted in a way pleasing to God by teaming righteousness and mercy.
 - Second, Joseph obeys God even when it costs him. Amazingly, a man who probably had a sterling reputation gave up his good standing for the sake of obeying God.

Mary

- **Question:** Ask participants to define God's favor. How do we know if God's favor is active in our lives?

- **Scripture Passage:** Have someone read Luke 1:26-33.
 - **Question:** After noting that Mary is twice described as favored by God (vv. 28, 30), ask what God’s favor meant for Mary. (See “Application” section for more on this.)
 - **Question:** Ask class members to remember their previous discussion of Joseph’s plan to divorce Mary. What possibilities face Mary due to God’s favor in her life?
 - **Explain:** Explain that for Mary, God’s favor meant being allowed to play a costly part in his plan. (See “Application” section for more on this.)
 - **Question:** What are ways that we are allowed to play a role in God’s plan? (Possible answers: witness, spiritual gifts, special callings, etc.) Are these roles always easy?
 - **Explain:** Mary’s story shows us that God’s favor doesn’t necessarily mean smooth sailing. Sometimes it means that God asks us to do hard things for his sake.
 - **Question:** Ask class members what they think of this kind of favor.
- **Scripture Passage:** Have someone read Luke 1:34-38.
 - **Question:** Ask participants what is going through Mary’s mind when she first hears Gabriel’s announcement. Point specifically to verse 34.
 - **Explain:** In this passage, Mary is confused about the possibility of her becoming pregnant because she is a virgin. Gabriel explains this in vv. 35-37.
 - **Question:** Ask participants what other questions might be going through Mary’s mind. (Possible answers: How am I going to tell my parents? What will Joseph think? What if Joseph divorces me?)
 - **Question:** Ask participants now to identify Mary’s response to this troubling news. Point specifically to v. 38 if needed. Ask participants if they would have been able to answer the same.
 - **Explain:** In the face of a big task and great uncertainty, Mary offers an amazingly faithful answer. She accepts the call. In this, Mary, like Joseph, teaches us about what it means to welcome God’s reign into our lives. Sometimes it means accepting a call that is filled with uncertainty and cause for worry.

Making It Personal

- **Explain:** Explain that Joseph and Mary show us several ways that we can welcome God’s reign into our lives. (It may be helpful to write “Everyday Commitment, Favor, and Obedience” on the board as you explain this section.)
 - First, Joseph shows us that we can commit ourselves to God’s way in everyday life.

- Second, Mary’s story offers us a different view of God’s favor. Like Mary, we can offer ourselves as instruments in God’s plan.
- Third, both Joseph and Mary receive special instructions from God. Like both of them, we can obey God’s special calls even when they are costly (Joseph’s probably cost him his reputation) and uncertain (Mary is given very little information on how things will play out).
- **Question:** Ask participants how we can commit ourselves to God’s way in our everyday lives.
 - **Possible Answers:**
 - Commit ourselves to righteousness and mercy like Joseph.
 - Commit ourselves to learning about God’s way through studying the Bible.
 - Commit ourselves to living out what we already know from the Bible.
 - Commit ourselves to taking the teachings of Jesus seriously, even in those moments when we want to ignore him.
- **Question:** Ask participants to recap ways they can offer themselves to God as instruments in his plan like Mary did.
 - **Possible Answers:**
 - Using spiritual gifts.
 - Witnessing.
 - Asking God for opportunities for service.
- **Question:** Ask participants if anyone would like to share a time in their life when God gave them special instructions. What was it like to obey?

ⁱ For more on betrothal and divorce in first century Jewish culture, see Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 88–94. All cultural information in this section is taken from this source.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 91.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 93.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 94.

^v For different ways to understand Joseph’s righteousness, see Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah : A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, Image Book ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books,, 1979), 125–128. My own interpretation trends toward option C in Brown’s scheme.

^{vi} Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 94–95.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 93.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 91–92.