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Title: Christmas Promises: Love

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: Genesis 6:9, Psalm 1:2, 1 Corinthians 13:7-8, 1 John 4:7-12

Text: [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

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Watch Service: [Christmas Promises: Love](#)



I had a conversation with someone this week about calling Christmas off. I don't think he was completely serious but he began with the suggestion and it was that blunt. "You should call Christmas off, Randy," he said. "It's the responsible thing to do. Businesses are suffering. The pandemic rages. No one feels up for it. We are all depressed

and it's not right to proclaim the birth of Jesus when so many are dead.

"

"You are saying that Matthew got it wrong?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"Matthew, the gospel. The first book of the New Testament. He tells the first story of Christmas and it begins in a cemetery." It didn't give him much consolation but it did give him pause.

You may have never noticed this but Matthew wanders around the family cemetery before introducing the birth of Jesus. You likely skip over it. Most do because there are a lot of tombstones to look at before you get to the last one. Cemeteries are this way with the older graves up front, visible as soon as you arrive. That's the way Matthew sees it. At the very beginning is father Abraham and right by him is his son, Isaac. Then, there is Jacob, and beside him his son Judah along with his brothers, all twelve are there including the dream reader, Joseph. It is a big place, bigger than Crown Hill in terms of generations. You can spend a long time wandering through this cemetery.

Fourteen generations are in one section; another fourteen in the second. The newest section is still old, with fourteen more generations. The last grave that Matthew wants us to look at is Joseph's. Can you see his tombstone? It's there if you look carefully. There is an inscription. "Joseph...a righteous man..." (Matthew 1:19)

I don't know what you want on your tombstone but this inscription says a lot. I'm not sure I'd want righteous. Righteous has fallen on hard times. It is often used to insult someone who acts judgmental, "You righteous so and so." A number of years ago, urban slang tried to redeem righteous as an expression as something amazing and cool. It came out of the surfing community. Dude that was a righteous wave. For a short time, it gained a footing in youth culture. Pizzas and songs, hero and athletics can be righteous. That's a righteous pie. That's a righteous play. Alas, it is no longer in the lexicon. But in the Bible, righteous is something very different.

Being righteous in scripture is someone who is committed to walk with God and keep the Law. In Bible times, everyone knew this. Noah is the first. "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9) The Psalms are filled with descriptions of the righteous with the most famous description found in the very first Psalm. Someone who is righteous and "...their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night." (Psalm 1:2) This describes Joseph. He meditates day and night on God's Word. He studied it, reflected on it, and wrestled with it until he embodied the word. He walked his talk and was known for it. When he went down the streets of Nazareth, people looked at him with respect, pointed to him, and said, "Joseph is a righteous man." It is an amazing description given the way things went down. A righteous man does without fail, what the Torah says to do. He doesn't bend the rules and that means, during betrothal, he doesn't sneak around with Mary before marriage.

Then Mary comes to him and says, "I've got some bad news and some good news. The bad news is I'm pregnant but the good news is I've been faithful to you. An angel came to see me and told me that I was going to have a miracle baby. The Holy Spirit conceived in me and the child will be the one promised by the prophets, the one whom we all hope for. I know it sounds impossible but "Nothing is impossible for God."

Can you imagine Joseph's struggle? Pregnant? An angel? A virgin birth? No way. He has to make a decision and he agonizes over it. I know Matthew doesn't say that but that's what a righteous man would do. He'd try to understand what the Torah told him to do. His first option was to report Mary. Make it public. If he did, according to Deuteronomy 22, she could be stoned to death. That's what the letter of the law suggested. She was pregnant, the child wasn't his, it was an open and shut case.

The second option was to quietly call off the engagement, divorce her. Mary's life would be spared, but their life together would be over. Other men

had done it. It was common in the first century. The law to stone was so cruel that men began quietly dismissing their wives or fiancées for adultery. It was a lesser punishment than death but still serious. Then Joseph would be free to marry another and put that whole mess behind him.

The third option was to go ahead and marry her, to respond to her with love and grace, to accept her whether or not he believed her story about a miraculous conception. That was the toughest choice but it is one that I like to think Joseph considered. This option would tarnish his reputation. People would talk and they would no longer think that Joseph was a righteous man.

You know this story so you know his decision "...unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, (he) planned to dismiss her quietly." (Matthew 1:19) Divorce her, the second option. A betrothal was a legal act at that time, so to end it required an act of divorce. That way he could minimize her suffering but maintain his status as a righteous man.

That was his plan but God had something different in mind and reveals it to Joseph in a dream. In the dream, he has a vision of an angel saying "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..." (Matthew 1:20c-21a). When Joseph wakes up, he remembers his dream. He doesn't put it aside as something odd or false. Like the one who he was named for in that ancient cemetery, the one who interpreted dreams for Pharaoh, Joseph interprets his dream and acts on it. He did what the angel commanded him to do. And what was that? He wasn't afraid. "Don't be afraid" Don't be afraid to take her as your wife. Don't be afraid to love Mary. That what you do when you marry, isn't it? You love. Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, to love her, to cherish her, in sickness and health, no matter what the circumstance, till death do you part. Don't be afraid to love. So, "...he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." (Matthew 1:24c-25)

What do you make of this story? I'll tell you what I think. I think Joseph doesn't get his due. Joseph is too often the forgotten man of Christmas, put to the back of our nativity scenes or left out altogether. If he gets any billing at all, he is the quiet obedient carpenter who rushes through the streets of his home town trying to find a decent room for his wife who is in labor.

It does him a terrible disservice for Joseph is the first man in the New Testament to understand the nature of God. Because Joseph is righteous, because he knows God, Joseph knows that "...love is from God; everyone

who loves is born of God and knows God...for God is love." (1 John 4:7a, 8b)

The first living, breathing character in the New Testament is the last man in Matthew's cemetery. He presents him as a good, righteous man who acts in a remarkable way. He loves scripture and knows scripture but he reads it through a certain kind of lens, the lens of the nature of a God who is loving and kind. Therefore, he says, "I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, her dignity, or her worth. I will protect her."¹ I won't be afraid to love because God is love.

That love carried Joseph for nine months and then, gave him the strength to make it from Nazareth to Bethlehem on that wonderful night when the cry of baby declared that God was with us, that God is Emmanuel. And I am confident as I am of anything in life, that when Joseph wrapped his arms around the baby Jesus and looked into his face, all Joseph saw was love. Joseph experienced love, not just for Jesus but because of Jesus.

Joseph realized this truth. God doesn't love us because of what we do for Him. God doesn't love us because of our accomplishments. God doesn't love us because we are righteous. God loves us because we are His. On days when we make God proud, on days when we get on God's every last nerve, when we fail to live up to even the most basic Christian expectations. God loves us still. Despite it all, through it all, because when we are swaddled in God's arms, and God looks into our face, all God sees is love. This is why "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." (1 John 4:9)

What does living through him mean? Joseph shows us. He loves. He loves Mary under the most difficult of circumstances and then he loves Jesus, loves him like his own son. His love was filled with mercy, compassion, kindness offered freely, without fear. This kind of love has power. It has the power to change hearts, to heal broken relationships, and to reconcile people and even nations. Love changes the one who receives it, but it also changes the one who gives it for "...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:12)

God's love, perfected in us. God living in us. He's not just Emmanuel, God with us. He is God in us, dwelling inside us. That's an incredible thing to consider, isn't it? God's love inside of you. God's love, perfected in you, and you and me. What a gift to unwrap, what a gift to discover. It means that we all have a role in God's unfolding Christmas pageant of love. It means that every year when we take the baby Jesus into our arms and look in his

face, we don't just give him our love, we take it in. God's love abiding in us, being perfected in us.

Even when you aren't lovely and when you don't feel as if you are worthy of the gift that has been offered, by loving Jesus, God's love abides in you.

Even when circumstances are hard and when life is difficult, even when businesses are suffering and a pandemic rages, when there is the heartache of death all around us, we don't have to be afraid. God's love abides in Jesus and we know that that "...love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Corinthians 13:7-8) It never fails. It is deeper, wider, stronger, and more enduring than anything. It outlasts everything.

Who doesn't want that? Who doesn't need that? I want it. I need it. Call off Christmas? No way! We have a gift waiting to be unwrapped. Don't be afraid to open it. You can even open it early. I give you permission. Take the gift in your arms. I make this Christmas promise. When you look into his face, you will know this truth. "God's love was revealed among us in this way..." (1 John 4:9a)

¹ Craddock, Fred B. (2011-04-13). The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock (p. 66). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.