

**St. Paul's Anglican Church**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sun Christmas; Matt 1:18 to 25**  
**Dec 30, 2018**

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Many great love stories hit “bumps in the road” early in the relationship. I would bet that many of us know about weddings that almost did not happen. Others among us have known the heartbreak and bruising associated with engagements that end before the wedding day.

This could have been the case in our gospel story about Joseph and Mary. In Jewish tradition, when it was agreed that a man and woman would be married, their engagement, or betrothal, was as binding as an actual marriage. So, when Joseph discovered that Mary was going to have a baby, he assumed she had violated their sacred commitment to each other. He knew he was not the father, so this was a perfectly logical human assumption.

Something must have gone wrong in this relationship; and Joseph must have been angry and extremely disappointed. How could his young, beautiful fiancé betray him like this? Adultery during the time of betrothal was as serious as in marriage, so, in his anger and hurt he had to decide what action he would take.

Deuteronomy 24:1 gave him the right to bring her public shame by divorcing her. Leviticus 20:10 states those guilty of adultery, the woman and the man involved, **shall surely be put to death!** What should he do?

Matthew tells us that Joseph, **being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily;** he would secretly give her a writ of divorcement. He would be sure this juicy bit of news would be kept out of those scandalous scrolls that have a way if circulating around Nazareth. He was hurting but decided not to hurt her; because he was **a just man**, he was brave enough to go against Jewish tradition, and even against the law, because he had compassion for Mary.

Have you ever gone to bed carrying a heavy burden with you; maybe pretty-much knowing what you must do, but still seeking wisdom because you are not totally comfortable with your decision. And then, just as you are settling comfortably into sleep mode, something goes on in your brain, and the solution becomes not just clear, but also right? (I hate it when this happens, because, then I have to get up, find a pen and write it down before I forget it).

This is what happened to Joseph; he must have had many negative emotions leading him in conflicting directions. But **while he thought on these things, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, fear not to take to thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.** Nothing “went wrong” in the relationship; something went “right.” And that something was God’s salvation plan because the angel continued, **and she shall bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.** Jesus means “Savior”.

He may even have awakened with the words of long ago, prophesied by Isaiah 7:14, playing over and over in his mind; **The Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.** Immanuel literally means “God with us.”

So, Joseph, this son of Mary, whom you will love as your own, and whom you will name Jesus, is the Messiah. He will save you and many others because He alone can pay the price to remove your sins. Oh, and by the way, He will also be known as Immanuel, because He is God!

Joseph showed courage when he initially decided to divorce Mary secretly; but now he goes much further. He listened to the **angel of the Lord**, and he believed; through his faith, he did what is right; he was obedient to God’s wishes. There is an important lesson here for each of us; our church tradition is important, but doing what is right in God’s eyes, with love and compassion, is much more important. (pause)

Have you ever heard someone say something like this, “I believe in the God of the New Testament; the God of the Old Testament was too brutal for me?” Was God’s love and compassion in the world before Jesus’ birth?

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah contains many chapters about God’s wrath; how He would punish his chosen people Israel for their disobedience to Him; how He would avenge Israel’s enemies; how He would judge the world. But it also contains many passages about God’s restoration for the Jewish remnant, those who are faithful to Him. Our reading (Isaiah 49: 8-13) is one of those passages.

While Israel is still in captivity, looking into the future, God told them, **In a time of favor I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, saying to the prisoners, Come forth, to those who are in darkness, Appear.** Yes, God has punished them, but in spite of their sinful ways, He will not forget those who remain faithful to Him, or, those who return to Him. “Come into my light all you who walk in darkness.”

And listen to the hymn of praise they will sing to God;

**Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the Lord has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his afflicted.**

God will have compassion on his chosen people, Israel, because He never stopped loving them.

It is easy for God to have compassion, because He is God. The question for us is, can you and I be as courageous and compassionate as Joseph when it is our time to make difficult moral decisions? In our epistle (Galatians 4:1 to 7) St. Paul tells us we can; and he tells us why we can!

He begins by noting that children are subject to their parents; even a child who will inherit much wealth and power is the same as a servant until the time the “family business” is entrusted to

them. Until then, they are official heirs, but not owners, they have no authority.

This was the condition of the Jewish people who **were under the law**, they were in bondage to God's laws because they could not earn salvation by being obedient to the law. It was not humanly possible for them to always avoid breaking the law. The Gentile believers were freed from **bondage under the elements of the world**; they were freed from the bondage of worshipping idols and seeking only worldly pleasures.

Paul said the status changed for all believers because **God sent forth his Son, to redeem them that we might receive the adoption of sons**. Christians went from slaves to sons and daughters of God through the sacrifice of God's Son.

One more step was required for us to practice Joseph's bravery and compassion in our own lives. Paul said, **because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts**. We have the Holy Spirit in us, speaking to us; He is always there, all we have to do is seek his wisdom, listen when He speaks to us, believe what He says, and obey Him.

Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins, and God's gift of the Holy Spirit that dwells in every Christians heart, we are no longer servants, or slaves to sin, we are fully charged **heirs of God**; we are sons and daughters of God who have been given authority to act.

We are now responsible and empowered to make decisions based on what is right in God's eyes. We are equipped to continue our Lord's ministry with the compassion, courage and love that He demonstrated to the world when He walked in a human body.

We are chock-full of the love and compassion of Jesus Christ; now it is time to share it with the world!

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.