

December 18, 2022  
Isaiah 7:10-16  
Matthew 1:18-25

Preparing for a Child

Joseph, it says, was a righteous man. He was a moral person, someone you could trust. He was the kind of guy you'd be glad to know, the kind you'd be happy to have as a neighbor. The kind of guy who would throw your newspaper on your porch and let you know if your garage door was up. He would probably shovel your sidewalk when it snowed and chase down your dog if it got loose. Joseph was a good guy, a reliable guy; someone who always did the right thing.

Joseph was righteous. The word for righteous in Greek is *dikaios*. It means virtuous and honorable. It's not just good, but really, really good. Exceptionally moral and just. Only a few people in the Bible are called righteous. Noah, Abel, John the Baptist, John the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And Joseph. He is *dikaios* as well. Just, honorable, and virtuous. Joseph has good standing with God. And with his community. Joseph was that guy, that no matter what, he would do the right thing.

Joseph was righteous. That's the first thing that the gospel of Matthew says about him. He is an exceptionally good person and he is engaged to a woman named Mary. Joseph is probably looking forward to settling down and starting a family. Marriage and family were very important in the life of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew. They were a part of that respectable life God wanted you to have. And we can imagine this righteous man, Joseph wanting to be a good husband and a good father. But that all gets interrupted when he learns that his fiancée, Mary, was found to be pregnant. And Joseph knows he is not the father. He cannot go through with the marriage now. Joseph is a righteous man.

Joseph lived for what was right and honorable. And whatever was happening right now with Mary was not right or honorable. It was not right or honorable for her to be with child now. It was not right or honorable that he should honor their marriage contract. He would need to call everything off. And he would probably need to make it clear why. He should call all the neighbors to come hear the charges against her so it would be clear. So they would know that Joseph was in the right. He

wouldn't ask them to stone her for her sin, though some might try. Some might want to make an example of her.

But Joseph is a righteous man. He isn't just good; he is really good. He is just and he is honorable. He doesn't want to shame Mary publicly. He doesn't want revenge. He doesn't want an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He doesn't want to disgrace her to make up for his disgrace. He will end his relationship with Mary quietly. Because Joseph is honorable and good. He is righteous. And sometimes that means more than just being right.

Being right is something we humans love to be. We enjoy letting others know that we are correct and that others are incorrect. We are superior and they are inferior. And it's even better when we have God on our side and our positions are God's positions too. Our politics are the right politics. Our judgments are the correct judgments on guns, abortion, LGBTQ rights. What cars people should drive, what pronouns people should use. We are right. They are wrong. "Look what it says right here in the Bible." Without considering context or culture or that God might

be whispering something different to us like an angel in a dream, calling us to do something even more righteous. Even more risky.

Being right is an obsession with us. It is an addiction. Even in the church. And we might want to name it the sin that it is. Because we do want to follow Jesus. But we really want to be right about it. We want to be correct and superior. We want to say that our way is THE way. Even if it no longer resembles the way of Jesus. And there is no compassion. And no mercy or forgiveness. And no faith in the power of God. And no hope that God can do impossible things. What we prefer is power. What we prefer is control. What we prefer is being right. And having God back us up.

But back to Joseph. He was a righteous man. He didn't just want to BE right. He wanted to DO what was right. That's what true righteousness is about. It's not about securing ourselves and making sure God is on our side. It's about BELIEVING that God is on our side, no matter what.

And so we can take a risk. We can make a mistake. We can trust that God will not reject us or abandon us. Because God is Emmanuel, God with us. And God is leading the way from slavery to freedom, from a

wilderness to a promised land, from emptiness and desolation and death to life abundant. God makes a way out of no way. And because we believe that, we can do big, brave, impossible things.

Joseph was a righteous man. So God called him to do something more than be right. He calls him to be good. He calls him to be compassionate and kind and merciful. God tells Joseph that Mary's pregnancy is something holy; that her child will be holy, and he, Joseph, must be part of bringing this holiness into the world. Nothing about this will look right or seem normal. It will be different. But that's what the world needs. It needs a different kind of family. It needs a different way to love. A different way to belong to God and have God belong to you.

It takes the righteousness of Joseph and of Mary and Joseph to believe in something more. To trust in something bigger than themselves, a power greater than their own. To have faith in a divine love that will use any means possible to save and redeem the world. To adopt the way of grace that wants to adopt as many as it can into the family; and worries less about being right and more about being good. It is not the way of power and control. But the way of surrender. The way of Christ, who though he

was God did not consider his godliness something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, he humbled himself to death, the death of a criminal, of one sinful and godforsaken. Jesus would follow this way; and before that Joseph would follow it. Even if it meant he wasn't right anymore. Even if it meant others thought he was wrong. He would take the risk. Because God would take the risk. God would take the risk to be our Savior. "Take Mary as your wife," the angel says. "Do not be afraid. Be Mary's husband. Name her child. Be a family. This will be something sacred. What will happen will be something holy."

Do not be afraid, Joseph. Do not be afraid to be mistaken. Do not be afraid to be wrong. Because we are all afraid to be wrong. We are afraid of the consequences. We are afraid of the damage to our reputation. If we don't go along with the conventional wisdom, people will think less of us. We will think less of ourselves. We won't be able to trust ourselves. But do not be afraid. You don't need to trust yourself. You need to trust God. "Joseph, the child that Mary carries is of the Holy Spirit. It is sacred and divine. Adopt him as your own and you will save

him from poverty. Adopt him and he will save you from despair and emptiness. Be the father of this child and you will do more than BE right. You will DO right. You will be part of the love that is bigger than any one of us. It is a new kind of family God is creating. Do not be afraid, Joseph.”

Don't just BE right. DO what is right. Don't just speak like God is on your side. Act like God is on our side, yours and mine, all of us. God doesn't want to condemn the world, but to save the world, our messy, broken dark little world. God wants to be with us. Not as a soldier or a warrior king. God comes as one of us. A child. A frail little baby. This is your sign, says the prophet Isaiah that God is with you. A young woman with a child. Yes, I know, things look bad. There are enemies on your doorstep. There are those who want to go into battle against the world. But look, says the Prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz, look, here is the sign from God: A baby named Emmanuel. Give the baby time to grow. Give the baby and his family time to develop and strengthen and get bigger. And by the time the child can eat honey and curds, all the threats will disappear.

The child is a sign that God is with us. Not our correctness or our rightness or our own perfect decisions. The child is the sign. We are not on God's side. That there is more to righteousness than being right.

There is more to faithfulness than destroying others for our faith. Do not be afraid, God says. I am with you. You are my own, part of my family. You are not alone. You are not going to break anything or mess anything up. Do not be afraid, Joseph. Do not be afraid, Mary. Take the risk. This is the way of righteousness. This is how God will save, through a child, through love.

Sometimes we must give up being right, for being good. We must care about the wellbeing of others and not just our own. We must look out for Mary. And take in her child and name him Jesus, and welcome Emmanuel, God with us. So we become part of something more, something bigger, a new kind of family. We have to let go, surrender how we thought things would be, and accept something new as holy and good even if others would see it as sinful, suspicious and shameful. We must love DOING right more than BEING right.



Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to risk loving others. Do not be afraid of giving up your own righteousness. Do not be afraid of the unknown. God is with us. Emmanuel is our sign. We give up the right to be right so we can hold him and love him as our own. So there can be a new kind of family, a new kind of Love that will risk everything to save us.