

“A Carpenter’s Courage”
Sermon Series – For Unto Us a Child Is Born
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First Presbyterian Church Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mt. 1:18-25)

Introduction.

Students here in Winston-Salem and all over the country are about to take final exams. There was once a student who was in a philosophy class in college, and when it came time for the final exam, the professor asked the students to answer just one question. The question: “What is courage?” All the students opened their blue books and began to write feverishly, drawing on everything they had learned in the class that semester – all except for one student. He took out his blue book, opened it up, wrote his name at the top of the page, and wrote down just two words. “This is.” The student closed his blue book, walked to the front of the class, turned in his exam, and walked out. Now, that’s courage. (Or maybe it he was just hoping the professor would think it was clever enough to give him a passing grade!)

In 1956, before he became President, John F. Kennedy wrote a book that was entitled *Profiles in Courage*. It was a volume of short biographies that detailed acts of bravery and integrity of several United States Senators in American history. It profiled eight leaders of our country from as far back as the early 1800s to a few in the 20th century who defied the opinions of their political party and constituents to do what they felt was right. And as a result, they suffered severe criticism and losses in popularity. Kennedy said these people demonstrated great courage in the face of criticism and opposition.

If there was a biblical version of *Profiles in Courage*, then Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth who was engaged to Mary and is one of the main characters of the Christmas story, would surely be included in it. As we make our journey through Advent, let’s consider this carpenter’s courage.

I. A Fiancé’s Crisis.

The text we’re studying today is part of what is called the *Annunciation*. It’s the story of the way in which God announced to Mary and Joseph how He was going to involve them in the story of salvation and the birth of the Messiah. And it tells us how God revealed to them His plan for the miracle of the Virgin Birth. In the gospel of Luke, the focus is on Mary and how she learned out about God’s plan, but in Matthew the story is told from Joseph’s perspective.

Notice what this passage says about the way in which Jewish marriages took place in the ancient world. Marriage in Jewish communities in the first century began with a betrothal, and it was an engagement that involved such a strong commitment that it actually took a divorce to undo it. Mary and Joseph were in a formal binding engagement as a part of an arranged marriage, and they couldn’t just call the wedding off and return the presents if they had a change in heart. To break the engagement required formal legal action.

Notice also the problem that takes place in in the middle of this story of impending marriage. An awkward moment occurs when Mary was found to be pregnant before the wedding and before she and Joseph had ever been intimate with each other. We who know the Christmas story know that Mary’s pregnancy was by the Holy Spirit, but it doesn’t take much imagination to realize how this must have sounded to Joseph. The pregnancy of a fiancée with whom you’ve never slept is a real crisis, and

Joseph's natural response would have been, "Who's the father?" When Mary told him that it was God, it only added insult to injury.

His next response was that he wanted out of the engagement, and who could blame him. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. This meant that he was diligent in observing the OT Jewish law, and he tried to live an intentional life of integrity and purity. The Torah was clear about what to do with someone in Mary's situation. The idea of his fiancée getting pregnant before they were married was scandalous, and it would open both of them up to ridicule. So, he decided to break off the engagement and get out of the marriage because he was a righteous man. However, Joseph was also a man of compassion, and not wanting to publicly humiliate Mary, he decided to divorce her quietly.

It took the intervention of God to dissuade Joseph from what he planned to do. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and he assured Joseph that what Mary told him about her pregnancy was true. And the messenger urged Joseph to take up the challenge of a very different life than the one he was planning. God wanted Joseph to go through with the marriage, to refrain from sexual relations with his wife until after the baby was born, and to raise a child that was not his own.

Think about the courage that was required for Joseph to do what God asked him to do. That's the second thing I want to talk about this morning.

II. A Carpenter's Courage.

C. Lewis once wrote, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means, at the point of highest reality. A chastity, or honesty, or mercy which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky." But here we see in the life of Joseph an example of courage in the face of great difficulty and regardless of the conditions. There are three truths about courage I want you to notice from the life of Joseph this morning.

First, notice that courage is revealed in the middle of difficult decisions. Because we live on this side of Christmas, we may want to rush to the end of the story where everything turns out okay. But if we do that, we miss out on the anxiety Mary's announcement of her pregnancy created for Joseph and the struggle he had as he tried to figure out what to do. You might even think that Joseph was spiritually slow and that he should have figured out what was going on a whole lot sooner. But if you do that, you miss the whole point of what Joseph was learning about courage.

This story about Jesus is just getting started. There will be visits by shepherds and wise men, anger by Herod, a flight to Egypt, and hiding out in Nazareth. Joseph is going to have to trust God with his path even though he can't see very far into the future. And it would be a very different journey of faith God was asking him to take. Would you have that kind of faith? Would you demonstrate that kind of courage?

When we are in difficult circumstances and we have to make tough decisions, it requires courage. Many times, we don't have all the data, and we can't see clearly into the future. Are we able to put ourselves in the hands of God and have the courage to follow where He leads regardless of what other people may think?

What difficult decision are you facing today? How is God asking you to trust Him with your future? Where is the Lord asking you to have courage?

Second, notice that courage seeks to do what God says even when it's hard. Joseph knew from the beginning that being involved in the story of Jesus was going to be difficult, and it would also affect his reputation. It would open him up to scandal and to whispers behind his back. There was no way that people in his small town were ever going to believe his account of what happened. As a result, he wouldn't be invited to their homes, it probably affected his business, and he would never be admired and respected in the synagogue as a lover of the Torah. If

he committed himself to this baby, he would do so at enormous sacrifice. His whole reputation would be trashed.

Friends, bearing Jesus to the world will always cause us to risk a certain amount of embarrassment. Since the time of Joseph, millions of people have made sacrifices for the sake of this one called Jesus. Many people have given up their status, reputations, possessions, convenience, even their lives. When Joseph looked into the eyes of people after he obeyed God, things were never the same for him. They never looked at him with the same kind of respect he once held as a righteous person. However, when he looked into the eyes of that child, the baby Jesus, he knew he had done the right thing.

What difficult circumstance are you in right now, and God is calling you to have courage? What adversity has come in your life, and God wants you to trust Him with your future and be willing to sacrifice even your reputation, if necessary, to do God's will?

None of us likes to lose. I sure don't. It's never easy when you come out on the losing side of something. You don't get the job. You don't close the deal. You're cut from the team. You're not invited to the dance. I think it's in those difficult circumstances in life that our courage can shine the brightest.

This week I read of the experience of one man's courage in the face of defeat, and it inspired me. In 1992, George H.W. Bush lost the election for President to Bill Clinton. It was a crushing defeat, and it meant he would only serve one term and not be able to complete the ambitious agenda he had set for his presidency. The night after he lost, George couldn't sleep, and at 3 o'clock in the morning he rose in the middle of the night and wrote these words in his journal.

"I ache and now I must think: how do you keep your chin up, keep your head up through a couple of difficult days ahead. I think of our country and the people on my team that are hurting, and there is so much we didn't do. And yes, progress that we made, but no, the job is not finished, and that kills me.... Be strong, be kind, be generous of spirit, be understanding, let people know how grateful you are, don't get even, comfort the ones I've hurt and let down, say our prayers and ask for God's understanding and strength, finish with a smile and with some gusto, do what's right and finish strong."

It takes courage to respond to defeat like that. How is God calling you to trust him, to do what's right, and to finish strong in the difficult circumstance you're in?

The **third** thing we learn from the example of Joseph is that **courage is willing to remain in the background and let others take center stage**. When you study the life of Joseph, you learn that his life isn't about him. Joseph was getting into something a lot bigger than himself. It happens every time someone is courageous enough to follow God wherever He leads. Their stories become larger than they are. They realize that they are here on this earth for a greater purpose than simply their personal peace and comfort. Your story is part of a much bigger story than you can imagine.

After the incident in the Temple with Jesus and His parents when Christ was 12 years old, we never read about Joseph again in the pages of Scripture. At one point while Jesus is itinerating around the Sea of Galilee, His family comes looking for Him. But only Jesus' mother and His brothers are mentioned. Joseph isn't anywhere around. Scholars speculate that Joseph died somewhere between the time Jesus was 12 and when the Lord began His public ministry when He was about 30.

Mary seems to be the one who gets remembered most during the Christmas story, and later on in church history Mary also appears to be the one who is most honored, especially among Roman Catholics. But both Mary and Joseph are central to the story of the incarnation of Christ. If it wasn't for Joseph following through with his marriage to Mary and raising Jesus as his son and even teaching Jesus a trade as a carpenter, what do you think would have become of Jesus and His mother in the ancient world? She was a single mother with no means of earning a living in the first century. They would have been destitute. Joseph did a very noble and courageous thing, and his selfless act and his willingness to remain in the background demonstrated a life of humility we would do well to emulate.

How is God asking you to remain in the background and let others get the credit? It takes courage to do that.

III. The Legacy of Joseph's Courage.

Have you ever wondered why in the world God decided to involve Joseph in His plan of salvation and ask him to take Mary as his wife and raise Jesus as his own son? It's a crazy idea. Maybe God decided that Jesus, who would be called a friend of sinners, should be raised in a family that knew firsthand what it feels like to be regarded as spiritually suspect and as an illegitimate son. Maybe part of the reason why Jesus had a heart for people who were considered unrespectable is that He was raised by a father who was willing to sacrifice his respectability for the sake of his wife and his son.

Maybe one reason Jesus had compassion on women who experienced scandal in their lives is that He knew what it meant to His mother that his father had stuck by her when she was single and pregnant, and when all the religious people would have urged him, "Divorce her." I think of how Jesus, as he was growing up, must have admired and appreciated His dad's courage.

Later, when Joseph was long dead and Jesus was a grown man, He said to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt. 5:20). Jesus might have been thinking to Himself, "*I've seen that better kind of righteousness firsthand. My earthly father was such a man.*"

Maybe God had a reason for this odd and painful way to start a family. Maybe God still calls people to be willing to die to reputation and status and comfort for the sake of love. That's why we seek to extend God's kingdom launched by that little baby. When Joseph made the decision to wed Mary, he thought it was the end of his being known as a righteous man. However, he believed what the angel told him in that dream – that the child he would adopt would one day bring salvation to the world. And He did. That's what we celebrate this Christmas.

The kind of courage Joseph had back then continues to show up in ordinary people today. There are countless stories of followers of Christ being brave in the hardest of times. Will you be one of those people and write your own story of courage in the coming week?

Conclusion.

In 2018, Sen. John McCain passed away. You'll recall that he was a pilot during the war in Viet Nam, and after his plane was shot down, he spent six long and difficult years as a Prisoner of War in a North Viet Nam concentration camp. There he was brutally tortured, and much of the time he was kept in solitary confinement. When he was released, John came back to the US, and he went on to become a Senator and a great statesman in our country. He lived a life of courage.

Toward the end of his life John McCain said this: "Courage is like a muscle. The more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. I sometimes worry that our collective courage (in America) is growing weaker from disuse. We don't demand it from our leaders, and our leaders don't demand it from us. And the courage deficit is both our problem and our fault."

I think we can all agree that we are living in an age when we lack great courage. We see plenty of bravado, there is plenty of look-at-me around, but when it comes to actual strength, inner courage, and fortitude, it is terribly lacking and we're really missing it. We've chosen comfort over courage. We've chosen safety over sacrifice. But Joseph gives us an alternative picture of a different way to live. He lived a life of courage in response to the call of God even when it was hard, especially when it was hard. And you and I are talking about him today as one of the heroes of Christmas and of our faith. Let's follow Joseph's example of courage which he demonstrated that first Christmas long ago. Amen.