

## **“The Resilient Hope of Joseph”**

### **Advent Sermon Series on *A Thrill of Hope***

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**(Mt. 1:18-25)**

#### **Introduction.**

Last week I read about a man named Archer Niyonizigiye who spent several months in a crowded camp for internally displaced people during Burundi’s civil war back in the 1990s. He was one of the thousands of refugees who had to flee their homes because of the conflict, but they couldn’t leave the country because they weren’t able to get a visa. He said that one of his most painful experiences in that camp was to see the way in which fathers had their masculinity shattered by all the change they had to deal with.

Men who had once been the providers for their families now had to rely on donated food from international relief organizations and social workers. They were deprived of their freedom to move about the country, and they were unable to do the work they had done all their lives, whether it was farming or doing business. Some began to drink heavily in order to deal with their depression and loss of identity.

Archer said that as he watched these men in that refugee camp, he began to think about Joseph, Mary’s husband. He also thought about how Joseph also had to flee as a refugee and how he also had to deal with the frustrations of trying to provide for his family in a context that had no stability. He reflected on the fact that Joseph could have become like one of these men. He could have resented the colonial government for all the ways they deprived him of opportunities and made him move all over the region. He could have also resented God for telling him to marry a woman who many of his friends would have said deserved to be divorced, if not stoned. And he could have tried to make up for his threatened masculinity by refusing to cooperate with God or by becoming a domineering chauvinist.

But that is not how the Scriptures portray Joseph, is it? Instead, we see this man, whom God selected to be the earthly father of Jesus, accepting the Lord’s unexpected direction in his life. And his heart wasn’t characterized by resentment but instead by wholehearted surrender to

God and His plan for Joseph and his little family. How did Joseph do it? How did he develop such resilient faith and hope? That's what I want to talk about this morning.

### **I. Joseph's Righteousness.**

The narrative about the birth of Jesus in the gospels makes it clear that Joseph was a righteous person. There is rich history behind this whole idea of being a righteous person, and it was a big deal in ancient Judaism. The Hebrew word for "righteous" and "righteousness" is *tsaddiq*, and it describes a person who is uncompromising in their observance to the Torah, the OT law of Moses. Joseph didn't eat unclean food, and he didn't mix with the wrong kind of people. He closed his carpentry shop on the Sabbath, and he was meticulous in doing everything he could to walk in a manner that was worthy of a right relationship with God.

Everyone knew this about Joseph, and it was central to his identity. As a serious Jew, being righteous was the kind of person Joseph strived to be. Just like an athlete wants to be an all-star, a Jewish person in the first century who was serious about their faith wanted to be a *tsaddid* – a righteous person.

What kind of reputation do you strive to have? How do people regard you, and what would it take for people to begin to say about you what was said about Joseph? In his book *Road to Character* David Brooks writes about the difference between what he calls resumé virtues and eulogy virtues. Resumé virtues are the skills and accomplishments you bring to the marketplace. But eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest, faithful, or loving.

We all know deep down that eulogy virtues are more important than the resumé ones, but do we live that way? Our whole culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching us the skills and strategies we need for career success than they do the character qualities we need in order to radiate an inner light of goodness. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than we are on how to build our inner spiritual life and character.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph was known for the righteous quality of his life, and I think it's one of the reasons God chose him for a unique role in the drama of salvation. It's one of the reasons we're talking about him today.

### **II. Joseph's Crisis.**

Mary breaks the news to Joseph and tells him she's pregnant. But she's quick to add that she hasn't slept with anyone else, and that it was actually God who has made her this way. Can you imagine the conversation? "The Holy Spirit did what to you? An angel said you were going to be the mother of the Son of God? A virgin birth? Who do you think you're kidding, Mary?" It must have been a very awkward conversation to say the least.

Joseph is a righteous man, but he's a righteous man with a problem. The girl he has promised to marry, and is legally betrothed to, is pregnant. And whoever the father is, Joseph

knows it isn't him. Nazareth is a small town, and he knows that word is going to get around as soon as Mary shows that little baby bump. So here we have a righteous man with a pregnant fiancée in a small town where everybody knows everybody else's business. It's a crisis.

But verse 19 gives us further insight into the personality and the heart of Joseph when it says that he didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Here we see the compassionate and merciful side of Joseph, and Matthew invites us to see how his righteousness is a mixture of both justice and grace. He could have ruined Mary's life in a very public way, but instead he decided to help her save face and divorce her quietly. He would spare her life, and he would also spare her all the public humiliation. Even before Joseph received God's message about Jesus, he demonstrated love for Mary in his commitment to protect her dignity from being overpowered by hyper-legalism.

Years later, Jesus would be confronted with a similar situation. A woman who committed adultery was brought before him, and the Pharisees asked Jesus, "What do you have to say about this? In light of the OT law, what do you think should be done to this woman?" (See John 8)

I wonder if when Jesus knelt down and drew in the dirt to think about His answer to the question whether or not He thought about a young pregnant teenager from Nazareth, and a young man named Joseph who risked everything to stand by her side. Like his earthly father, Jesus stood up for that woman and He challenged the religious people who wanted to kill her. And He showed a different kind of justice, a justice that brings together grace with truth. Jesus said to the woman's accusers, "If anyone among you is without sin, let him be the one to cast the first stone." And one by one, they all walked away.

Like father, like son.

Is there a vulnerable woman you need to support today? Is there someone you need to be an advocate for? And how does God want you to stand in the gap for someone who needs help?

### **III. Joseph and the Angel.**

In verse 20 we read, "*After he had considered [divorcing Mary quietly], an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.*" Now why do you think God made Joseph wait until after he struggled with what to do about Mary before He sent the angel? Why didn't He just send the angel in the first place? That sure would have made things a whole lot easier for everyone. Is it possible that removing Joseph's anxiety wasn't God's number one goal for Joseph? And maybe it isn't His number one goal for you either.

I think there are times in our lives when God allows us to struggle with what we really believe that our lives should be all about, and He makes us wrestle with what we're supposed to do. This especially happens when we're in the middle of difficult circumstances in life. Maybe

the Lord wants to use the struggle you're experiencing right now, just like He did in Joseph's life, in order to teach you something and to make you more open to what He wants you to do.

When the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, he said, "*Don't be afraid...*" Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her really is from the Holy Spirit. She's telling you the truth. Why would the angel say, "Don't be afraid"? What did Joseph have to be afraid of? He was afraid of losing his reputation of being considered a righteous man. He was afraid of losing his dreams of a happily-ever-after kind of life, of getting married, settling down, and having children of his own. And he was afraid of being an outcast. In that day this sort of thing would have affected every part of a person's life – his business, his friendships, his family, everything. So the angel said, "Don't be afraid. Mary hasn't betrayed you. The child is God's, and the Lord will be with you in this."

I think about how loud the voice of fear is sometimes in my own life. The fear of failure, of missing out, of losing my reputation, of losing someone I love, the fear of retiring. What fear do you have this morning? What are you afraid of? And what would happen this Christmas if you prayed, "God, I'm afraid of this..." (and you fill in the blank and name whatever fear it is you have). And then pray, "God, would you please help me trust You and to know that you are with me. Please help me step out in faith even when I'm afraid." Trust that God will be with you in whatever fear you face today, just like He was with Joseph.

#### **IV. Joseph's Resilient Hope.**

There is a lot we don't know about Joseph – when he was born, where and how he died, and when it happened. We actually don't read anything in the Bible about Joseph after the incident in Luke 2 about Jesus getting lost at the temple in Jerusalem when He was 12. And Joseph is the only person in the drama of Christmas who has no speaking lines at all. Zero. Nada. Zilch. Bubcus. He never says anything. Instead, he lets his actions do all the talking.

But what we do know about Joseph is the most important thing to know about him. He was interested in doing God's will more than anything else in his life. When the Lord asked him to take Mary as his wife and to raise the child as his own, no matter how hard or challenging it might have been, he was ready to respond in faith. He said "yes!" to Jesus with his whole life.

I have to say that the sparseness of the narrative of this story is rather remarkable to me. It simply says, "*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary as his wife*" (1:24). It was instant obedience. Whenever I have a strange dream, I usually awaken and puzzle over its interpretation. But not Joseph. He woke up and acted on what he had been told. I marvel at his trust.

Later on, Joseph had another dream in which an angel spoke to him, and this time the angel warned him about the impending danger of Herod's murderous plans for the child. So he took his wife and young child, and they fled to Egypt. They were refugees, undocumented residents, living in a foreign land. Only later, after Herod died – and at the urging of another dream – did

the family return to Nazareth where they settled down. For Joseph it was one sacrifice after another.

Joseph is remarkable in his faithfulness and obedience. In spite of the whispers going around the village, in spite of how ridiculous it all sounded, in spite of all the ways following this path would destroy his dreams for a good and “righteous” life, he trusted God.

So Joseph took Mary as his wife, and he welcomed this child, not his own, into his family. Imagine the challenge of sitting across the table from his son, and to see no physical characteristics that resembled himself. But Joseph raised the boy as his own, and he taught him the trade of being a carpenter. And he helped shape Jesus’ faith and His character as He grew up. Isn’t this what it means to walk by faith – to move out of your comfort zone, to follow God’s call even when it’s hard and you don’t know how it’s all going to work out. Isn’t that what the Christian life is all about?

How is God asking you to trust Him this Christmas? In what ways is He pushing you out of your comfort zone? And where do you need to respond with obedience and faith even if no one else around you understands? Follow Joseph’s example and do what God is calling you to do. A special blessing awaits if you do it.

### **Conclusion.**

I began my message talking about Archer, the man who lived in the refugee camp in Burundi, and his observation that the experience of being a refugee tended to emasculate the men in the camp and lead them into depression. That didn’t happen to Joseph. He was able to develop resilient hope in spite of his circumstances because of his relationship with God, and it enabled him to live a courageous and sacrificial life of service, to God and to his family. Joseph’s quiet heroism often gets overlooked in Nativity scenes, where wise men, shepherds, angels, and sometimes even the sheep upstage him. Down through history, Joseph doesn’t even make it into some of the most prominent paintings of Christmas with mother and Child.

Yet there is something profound and compelling about Joseph and his resilient hope. To me he’s the patron saint of stepfathers and everyone who is willing to raise a child that wasn’t their own. He’s also an example of faithfulness for anyone who has been asked to play a minor role in life. Leonard Bernstein was once asked, “What’s the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play?” He replied, “Second fiddle.”

Many years later, when Joseph had been dead for a long time and the boy he adopted had become a grown man, this same Jesus would say to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, *“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20)*. I wonder where He learned that. I wonder if, when Jesus said these words, He was thinking to Himself, “I’ve seen this kind of righteousness firsthand. I saw it in my earthly father. I saw it in Joseph.”

When Joseph took Mary as his wife, he probably thought it would be the end of his being known a “righteous” man. What he didn’t know then is that the Child he would adopt would

one day bring to all of us a new kind of righteousness – a righteous of the heart given to us because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Like Father, like Son. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), xi.