

HANDLE WITH COURAGE

Christmas in Joseph's Hands

Text: Matthew 1:18-25; John 1:4-5

A Divine Catastrophe

Along with the story of Mary we studied last week, there is another figure in the Advent story whose way of handling the events of Christmas has a lot to teach us, I think. I'm speaking, of course, of the man history simply knows as JOSEPH. I want to shine a light on him today and begin by describing an experience I once had that has deeply increased my own respect for the context in which we meet this man.

About 11 years ago, my wife Amy and I were in the midst of one of those particularly challenging seasons of marriage and family life that, perhaps, some of you understand. Finances were tight, emotions high, and the sense of partnership between Amy and me at a pretty significant low. Amy was making plans to go back to work at the time – a change that I hoped would help to lift both her spirits and our family finances. And, then, the news suddenly came that she was pregnant. We were going to have an unexpected child. I'll say more about how that turned out in a moment, but I have to tell you that, at that time, this event seemed certain to put us under. I remember sitting up in bed, putting my feet on the floor and my face in my hands, and uttering a phrase that ripped up out of my gut from a place of total, dark, hopeless despair: "This is a *catastrophe*."

I don't know exactly how Joseph felt when Mary broke the news to him that she was expecting a child. The Bible doesn't provide us with that detail, but I think of that morning in my house and wonder if it might have been something like that. The Bible says, in Matthew 1:18 – **"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."** I don't think I need to paint for you what would have been going through Joseph's gut at the moment he discovered this news. You understand that, no matter how Mary may have explained it, it would not have felt like a Divine Interruption to his life. This thing that Mary was reporting – it was nothing less than an utter catastrophe.

Joseph had done everything right in their relationship, so far as we can tell. The Bible actually makes it clear in the subsequent verse that Joseph was an exceptionally good man. Yet the news he was given suggested that, apparently, his good behavior did not matter at all. Unless he was remarkably naïve or uncommonly mystical, he would have to conclude that he'd been betrayed by the very person to whom he'd given his heart. The only real question was HOW he would handle this catastrophe. Would he abandon Mary coldly -- just leave her to freeze and fend for herself as the penalty of her lust and faithlessness? Would he deal with his hurt angrily – stoning her verbally or physically --

as the Law of Israel allowed for so obvious an adulterer? Would he stay with her, pretending that the child was his, living a sham and waking every morning to the shame. No, the Bible says, **"Because Joseph [Mary's] husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."**

Responding to Catastrophes

These are always among the ways open to people in the face of life's catastrophes, aren't they? Sometimes, someone decides to just GO COLD. "I'm going to numb myself. I'm going to stop feeling anything." Or sometimes they decide to GET HOT. "I will rage against this darkness. I will blast the person that did this, even if it's God, even if it's ME who brought this on. Somebody has to pay." Sometimes they decide to GO UNDERGROUND. "Other people don't need to know about this. I'll pretend like nothing's wrong. I'll manage." Or, like Joseph here, sometimes someone decides to just GET AWAY. "I'll keep moving. I'll just try to put some distance between myself and this chaos, this heartache, this terrible despair of living in a world where bad things happen to good people and to not-so-good people alike.

But there is always one further option, isn't there? There's always this possibility that someone might choose to do the completely counterintuitive thing. They might choose to believe that the cataclysmic thing that is happening to them could, in fact, be a DIVINE CATASTROPHE. They might elect to see this event which brings such pain and turmoil, not as a sign that hope is gone, but as the beginning of a new hope through which will be revealed the awesome good purposes of God.

Matthew 1:20 says that **"after [Joseph] had considered [all his options], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, DO NOT BE AFRAID to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "GOD WITH US."**

The Light Shines in the Darkness

Is it possible that it works this way in our lives as it did in Joseph's? Could some of the apparently worst things that befall us actually be avenues for the movement of the best? What if some of these catastrophes were necessary pathways toward discovering **"God with us"** at a level we've never experienced before? What if **"all this [turmoil] takes place to fulfill what the Lord"** wants to do for good in and through our lives? It takes a lot of COURAGE to believe that – especially since most of us don't have the

benefit of an angel showing up to convince us of it. Unless, of course, you'll allow me to play that messenger role today.

It has been my privilege to talk to people every week who seem to be facing circumstances that are similarly despair-inducing and worse. In one way or another, a very difficult message gets delivered to them: "I'm sorry but you can't work here anymore." Or "Listen to us: Alcohol is beating you and we know it." Or "I'm afraid the test results were not good. We found cancer." There are people who have heard the words: "The marriage is over. Here are the divorce papers." Or "The police are at the door and you're going to jail." Or "I'm sorry to inform you that there's been a terrible accident." Or "We don't have money to pay the bills. We're out of credit."

In every one of those situations and many more we could list, the same choices that Joseph faced are presented to us. Do I go cold or get hot? Do I go underground or try to just get away? Or do we do the courageous thing, like Joseph finally did: Do we trust that God is in this, and that if we resolve to TRUST him and to OBEY his calling to us, something may yet be borne that is dramatically better than we can see from our current place in the darkness?

We had no idea at the time that the "catastrophe" that struck Amy and me eleven years ago was the beginning of a whole new spiritual journey for each of us. It meant trusting more deeply than we had in awhile that God really had brought us together for a purpose. It meant obediently staying in the relationship, doing our own personal work on our character, and praying that God would do in us or our partner what we didn't know how to do. We did not get out of the darkness over night. But the journey of trusting and obeying led to a profound renewal of our marriage, and, of course, the birth of our wonderful third son. What an amazing gift he has been to our family.

I know of men whose salvation lay in being sent to prison and of people whose relationship with God and their loved ones only really hit stride when they lost their job or their health. I know there are plenty of stories where things went the other way. But I have never seen a situation where someone has courageously trusted God and perseveringly obeyed his call -- to wait in prayer, to forgive, to love, or to follow any of his other commandments -- who did not ultimately see something born that fulfilled God's good purposes.

It can be unimaginably hard to hold on to that belief. I know it still is for Rob and Lori Chana who gave me permission to tell you their family's story today. As some of you know, their 22 year-old son died in a bizarre bus crash this past June. So much about Cameron's death still feels like nothing but a senseless catastrophe. Sometime before his accident, however, something (or Someone) moved Cameron to do something unusual. He went to a website called donatelifeillinois.org. The site reports that 1 in 20 Americans will need some type of medical tissue transplant during their lifetime. More than 4,700 are waiting for a transplant in Illinois alone. An average of 18 people die

each day, waiting for a transplant. Few 22 year-olds, at the peak of their health, think about such things. But Cam Chana did and he registered himself as an organ donor.

This past week, Rob and Lori met a man named Nathan in whose chest now beats Cameron's heart. He will be married in the coming months and the Chana's will be going to the wedding. A father of two children now has a set of wonderfully healthy lungs and will get to see his kids grow up. A 52 year-old man will survive now because he was gifted with a liver in peak condition. A 42 year-old woman from North Carolina and a 15 year-old boy from Kentucky now each have the kidney they needed to save their life. A Chicago man and another from Peoria can see the Christmas tree this year, because Cameron Chana gave them the gift of sight. And in the years to come, who knows how many hundreds of other lives will be saved or changed for the good by his story.

Was Cameron's death one of those *divine* catastrophes? I don't know. But this I do: Once, long ago, someone else's precious son died what seemed at first only a senseless death. Yet out of that darkness there flowed a Life and Light that is still changing and saving lives, even to this day. Remember this, when you or someone you love is facing a catastrophe. You may need to spend awhile with your face in your hands. But remember to take this story in your hands as well, so that despair doesn't win. Do not be afraid, but take courage. Trust in God. Obey his commandments. And you may be surprised by what finally gets born. And thus, the scriptures say: **"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. He had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name JESUS."**

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Handling Christmas (Part 3)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Describe a time in your life when something happened that you experienced as a total catastrophe. What was it about this event that was so cataclysmic? How it affect you?
2. Of the various ways of handling a catastrophe, which of the following have you tried? How has this worked for you? What are the pro's and con's of these approaches?
 - GO COLD -- *"I'm going to numb myself"*
 - GET HOT -- *"I will rage and get payment"*
 - GO UNDERGROUND -- *"I'll pretend nothing's wrong"*
 - GET AWAY -- *"I'll get some distance on this"*
3. Joseph displayed a remarkable trust and obedience toward God in the midst of devastating circumstances. Could you imagine yourself responding the way he did? Do you find it easier, harder, or about the same level of difficulty to trust God and obey his commandments in tumultuous seasons of life? Why is that?
4. Describe a time when you were surprised by how light came out of darkness or good out of something very painful. What does this say about Go or about you?
5. What is one area or situation in your life where you sense God may be calling you to exercise a daring TRUST? What is one thing you are doing or could be doing to OBEY his commandments him in these circumstances?