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If by this point you're sick of hearing about the Christmas story in church, I've got some bad news for you. The "twelve days of Christmas" only started 5 days ago. It's not even Three King's Day yet.

If it wasn't clear already based on this morning's Scripture reading, I chose today to take us back to the birth of Jesus.

The chronicle of the nativity is a story about multiple people. Above all, it's a story about Jesus, and what the reality of Jesus Christ means to us as humans. We talk about that at Christmas every year. It's also a story about Mary, a young woman—if the customs of the time are any indication, a very young woman—who consents to the most incredible of responsibilities: bearing, birthing, and bringing up the Son of God, savior of the world, and King over all. Suddenly pregnant through the mysterious miracle that is the power of the Holy Spirit, on speaking terms with an angel, and having to explain all this to the man she was contracted to marry... the story of Mary should be profound to anyone who reads it—Christian or not, female or not.

It's also a story about shepherds—common people, salt of the earth, for whom all this miracle business is *way* over their heads. It's also a story about wise, wealthy strangers from a far land bowing to an impoverished foreign baby. It's also the story of an innkeeper with a job to do, someone I may have a little extra compassion for because I've played him in the Drive Thru Nativity two years in a row.

It's also the story of a crazy hermit, his biologically impossible parents, and yet another ruler who wishes to see Jewish children rounded up and killed.

But in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew chooses to tell the story of Joseph.

Now, with a lead in like that, my first instinct is to sigh, roll my eyes, and say, "*Men.*" Hey, you know what voice we were really missing in the Bible? The *man's* voice. It's not like most of the books of the Bible are named after, written by, and *about* men or anything.

But this time, for once, the person who actually gets short shrift in the Gospel accounts of the life of Christ is his adoptive *father* Joseph. Even in the account that gives him the most screen time, he doesn't have any lines. Meanwhile, Mary sings an entire song, and appears in scenes *throughout* Christ's life to the end, while *Joseph* is only occasionally *mentioned* in passing, like the older brother on Happy Days who went upstairs in season one *and we never saw him again*.

Don't get me wrong, I'm so glad we get to hear from a different voice as she seeks to make sense of all the things God's doing in the world. It's part of why I love the books of Esther and Ruth so much. There's only so much of life experience you can get through the eyes of a man, just like there's only so much of life experience you can get through the eyes of a woman, and having a healthy spiritual life means empathizing with perspectives you can easily identify with *and* perspectives completely alien to your experience.

Today, I want to focus on Joseph's story not because it's more *important* than Mary's—frankly, it's *not*—but because of how few column inches it gets. It's easy to relegate Joseph's experience to the background, or at best a curiosity. But Matthew takes time to polish Joseph's corner of the account of Christ's birth, and I think it can teach us an important lesson.

Mary's story tells us a lot, and it would take a lot of sermons to tease out even *most* of the messages God has for us in the experience of such an amazing human being. Stick around for a few years, because if you'll have me I'm certain I'll be working through several of them. We covered some of it in the lead-up to Christmas, and we hear the messages in song every year.

Joseph's story is important too, and we learn something from *his* experience... about taking risks.

I had a friend in college named Lisa. She's a couple years older than me. A year and a half ago, she was living in Massachusetts, where she'd lived her whole life, with a job and her whole extended family around her. It was a safe life, a reasonable life. But she felt an urge. There was something more on the horizon; something she was supposed to do that wasn't going to happen staying in the comfort zone she had built around herself.

After agonizing about the decision, she finally made the choice to leave her job, get her affairs in order, and move out to California without even knowing where she would find work. Just trusting that she would, and that this *risk* she was taking was worth it.

This Christmas the love of her life asked him to marry her. She's got a new job, new friends, a marriage on the way, and a new lease on life. You can just tell by the way she talks about it; it's like her heart has woken up.

I don't know if I would have been able to take a leap of faith like that. I'm a big fan of safety, security, and the *reasonable* course of action. I'm not very good at taking a risk when playing it safe is so much more reasonable.

Lisa could have stuck with her job, with easy access to a family who could support her if she needed it, living in the only world she had ever known. And she'd probably be doing fine now if she had. But some voice inside her wouldn't let that stand. Something inside her was telling her to take a leap of faith into something that was scary and uncertain, but in the end turned out to be what took her *exactly* where she needed to go, doing *exactly* what she needed to be doing.

Joseph found himself at a moment like that, too. A moment where he had to make a decision between the safe, reasonable option, and something else entirely.

Joseph was betrothed to Mary, which in Jewish culture at the time was a bit more formal than the kind of engagement we're used to today. There was a binding, written contract that involved the bride's parents, there were certain legal, cultural, and religious expectations around their responsibilities to each other, and contingencies for every action that might take place before the wedding.

While they were in this—for lack of a better term—first stage of marriage, Joseph discovered that Mary had become pregnant without any involvement on his part. Now the people of Joseph and Mary's day weren't ignorant—they had no more reason to expect a virgin birth than *we* do today. If we put ourselves in Joseph's shoes—or perhaps put Joseph in ours, if that's easier—it's not hard to imagine what may have gone through his head when he found out his betrothed was with child, even though he had not lain with her.

Joseph was a righteous man and a man of the Law, by which I mean the Law of the Jewish people laid down by God in the Hebrew Scriptures, what some of us call the Old Testament. Joseph knew that if Mary had lain with another man, either consensually or not, strict interpretation of Jewish Law would find her guilty of adultery, and the only thing that would keep her from being put to death was that the Roman overlords didn't allow the Jews to enforce the death penalty on their own. Instead she would be publicly divorced, shamed, shunned, and her life forever tainted by stigma. No woman or child in Jewish society could hope to have anything resembling fullness of life in such a state.

However, Joseph had compassion for his betrothed, and while he still felt obligated to follow God's Law, he understood the Divine mandate that the Law be tempered with mercy. So he prepared to do what he saw as the honorable thing. A quiet dismissal, with no public statement or recognition. A 1<sup>st</sup> Century analog to a

“no-fault divorce.” That still left Mary with a baby born out of wedlock, but she wouldn’t be exiled, spat on, or stoned.

So, too, could *Joseph* go his own way, his reputation unstained, and more importantly his conscience clear. Not only would he have obeyed God’s Law, but he would have upheld the cause of righteousness through dealing mercifully with a woman who—in his eyes—had wronged him.

Now, it’s hard for us as modern, 21<sup>st</sup> Century people to feel the level of sympathy for Joseph that we’re supposed to. If Joseph lived today and he thought his fiancée had been, say, assaulted by a stranger in an alley and become pregnant, and *he* felt wronged and that his only recourse was to drop her like a bad habit and sweep the whole thing under the rug... it’d be *really* hard to call him “Good Guy Joseph” after that. At least I *hope* so.

But this is why I was talking about alien perspectives at the start of this sermon. From the perspective of an observant Jewish man in the Holy Land two thousand years ago, *everything*—society, religion, upbringing, conventional wisdom—everything was telling him that not only was this the right call, but he was actually going above and beyond, both for her and for the God to whom he belonged.

This was the reasonable choice, the safe choice, and frankly the *only* choice God had given him. See her shamed and her life and reputation *destroyed*, or set her free to the best life she could hope for, given the circumstances.

But God had other plans. God wanted Joseph to take the biggest risk of his life. A risk that bucked all conventional wisdom, and one that would throw away all Joseph’s hopes for a normal life.

In a dream, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

I should really lay off the pepperoni and anchovies before bed, if I’m gonna get dreams like that.

So let’s unpack this for a minute. You’re Joseph. The woman you’re contractually betrothen to is suddenly pregnant. Who knows where the baby came from; she’s certainly not saying anything that makes sense to you. Not anything you *believe* anyway. You’re within your religious and societal rights to ruin her life for what she’s done to yours, but you decide to do the righteous thing and let her off easy, going your separate ways.

While I was putting this sermon together I almost used the phrase, “washing your hands of her,” but that phrase hadn’t been invented yet. Then I remembered that that phrase was invented by Pontius Pilate, the man who would put that very Son of Mary to death thirty-three years later. It’s a weird moment of... I don’t know, foreshadowing? Double vision? that I’d never noticed before.

Because in the end Joseph *doesn’t* wash his hands of Mary. Who knows what would have happened if he had?

But *just* when you’re about to wipe the slate clean and set off in search of another bride to bear your own children, an angel of the Lord comes to you in a dream and tells you *not only* to not be afraid to violate ancient Jewish religious convention by taking this woman as your wife, and *not only* to trust that the child she bears was conceived by the mystery and miracle of the Spirit of God, but *also*... you are to name the child yourself.

You are to officially, in the sight of God and men, take this child as your own, and any first-born son of your own blood will always take second billing to this child that has nothing of you in it. This child, this

*stranger* will carry on your family line, and have first right to your property and legacy. You, whose lineage can be traced all the way back to the great King David, and further to Abraham himself, father of all the Jewish people... God is asking you to give that lineage to a child that isn't yours. A child conceived out of wedlock.

In *our* world that's a beautiful thing, something that's done as a matter of *course* all the *time*. What makes us children or parents isn't blood. It's *family*.

But in Joseph's world, that's a *totally unreasonable* request! Not only does it go against all conventional thought, but it calls for a *huge* sacrifice on Joseph's part, it'd throw his life into turmoil, and it'd open him up to scandal and the real possibility of losing his entire *place* in society.

God is asking Joseph to take a risk. A risk that flies in the face of everything that's safe, everything that's known, everything that makes any kind of *reasonable* sense.

I think the voice of God was nudging my friend Lisa to take a risk too. To risk her security, her comfort, her common sense, and the respect of her friends and family here in New England, the heartland of Yankee sensibility. And I'd say she's *glad* she listened to that voice. She took that risk, and less than two years later her life has exploded into bloom.

“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

Joseph listened to the voice of God, and Joseph *took* that risk, come what may. Like I said, we don't know much about the details of Joseph's life after he committed to raising the baby Jesus as his own, but what it meant for this young, pregnant woman and the baby she would bring into this world cannot be overstated. Joseph took a leap of faith, embracing the impulse God had placed in his heart... and his life—and the story of a little boy from Nazareth whom we call Emmanuel, God-with-us—was forever changed.

The chronicle of the nativity is a story about multiple people who each teach us something different. *Joseph* teaches us that we should *listen* when God tells us to take the risk.

And I'm not talking about that urge to put it all on black or double down on an inside straight in Vegas. I'm talking about the risks *God* wants us to take. Learning how to tell the difference? Well that comes from committed prayer, active faith, and a healthy spiritual life. Joseph had a head start on us on that one.

But I truly believe that God calls us to take certain risks in our lives, risks that are sometimes far from sensible. Risks like the one that Joseph made, risks like the one that Lisa made, and yes, even smaller risks that don't require you to pick up stakes and move three thousand miles away. Sometimes a risk like that is just picking up a phone and dialing a number you swore you'd never call again. Sometimes it's standing up for someone you've never met before. Sometimes it's applying for a job that isn't like *anything* you've ever done before—or even *wanted* to. Sometimes it's just asking for *help*.

Maybe God is asking you to take a risk right now. Maybe there's something in your *life right now* that God is trying to get through into your heart.

The next time you're alone in prayer... the next time *I'm* alone in prayer... let's open our hearts to really listen to the message God has for us. The message God is speaking to us. Because God wants something from all of us.

Maybe this time it's a risk.

Amen.