

SERIES: The Christmas Story – A Look at the “Second String” (Slide #1)

TITLE: "Joseph: An Ordinary Man with an Extraordinary Problem"

TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25

DATE: November 25, 1995

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Sooo. . .how’s the Christmas season going so far?
 1. Here we are two weeks in (two months in according to the stores) and the activities are most likely ratcheting up for all of you.
 2. I know they are for us: time being sought to buy gifts for one another, the beginning of the Christmas parties, the school concerts; other concerts (Steve Green), etc.
 3. It’s a fun time of year – keep that in mind – and will remain so if we can pace ourselves and even be willing to say “no” from time to time so we don’t stress out and lose perspective.
- B. As we continue on through the season, our sermon series this month is focusing in on what I have termed “The second string.”
 1. As we all know, there’s only one “first string” in the Christmas drama: Jesus. He is the reason for the annual celebration. . . .the only reason.
 2. But we also know that there is an important supporting caste in the Christmas drama.
 3. Last week we considered the life of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist, the fore runner of Christ.
 4. This week we turn to a second “second stringer” by the name of Joseph.
 5. In Joseph we have one who is closer to the star – he will be the earthly father for Jesus – but still second string.
- C. (Slide #2) Let me reset the stage from last week if you will.
 1. As you remember, we began our look at the second string in the book of Luke.
 2. The Gospel of Luke was a book written for an audience of one – Theophilus – but that one was in most ways like us today.
 3. It says as the book of Luke opens, that Luke is writing to Theophilus **“so that [he] may know the certainty of things you have already been taught.” (Lk. 1:4)**
 4. In other words, Theophilus was not someone who was uninformed concerning the story of Christ – He just didn’t fully understand it or had not found someone who could explain the intricate details of the life of Christ in an orderly way.
 5. The challenge of last week was to become modern day Theophiluses – Theos if you will.
 - a. We know the story.
 - b. The challenge is to look deeper into the story and see what more we can discover that will help us discover modern day lessons.
 - c. The goal is to “go underneath the story” to the details, many of them having to do with Jewish tradition.
 - d. In those details we discover some life lessons even while we celebrate the birth of Christ.
- D. Our second string hero today is Joseph. The title of our sermon is:“Joseph: An ordinary man with an extraordinary problem.” Joseph is a classic second string hero. How so? (Slide #3)
 1. (Slide #4) To begin with, it seems to me that Luke kinda sees Joseph as an afterthought – classic second string.
 - a. After the introduction to the book, **Luke 1:5-25** tells of the announcement of the coming of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

- b. **Verses 26-38** speak of the angelic visit to Mary and the announcement that she will give birth to the Messiah.
 - c. **Verses 39-45** tells of Elizabeth's visit to Mary, a visit that will last three months.
 - d. **Verses 46-56** records Mary's song of rejoicing.
 - e. **Verses 57-66** tells us of John the Baptist's birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth.
 - f. **Verses 67-80** offers to us Zechariah's song.
 - g. Call me over reactive, but does it strike anyone else as odd that not once has Joseph been mentioned in all of this? Seems like he might at least get a brief nod.
 - h. But have no fear, he's finally mentioned in chapter 2, verses 4-5 where our first recorded statement about Joseph is that he's on the way to Bethlehem to register along with Mary who was pledged to be married to him and while there Jesus is born.
 - i. Now I'm exaggerating, of course, but it seems to me that in Luke's eyes Joseph is simply an escort, getting Mary to the birthing room. Classic second string in my eyes.
2. **(Slide #5)** For what it's worth, the gospels of Mark and John don't even talk about Joseph – or Mary for that matter – in their birth narratives. Mark doesn't even have a birth narrative.
3. **(Slide #6)** So we come back to Matthew who seems to have the most to say about our second stringer, but even his account causes me to chuckle.
- a. Now it may only be me and my twisted humor (because Nancy and Abby didn't really get this), but Matthews account has something funny about it.
 - b. The genealogy of Jesus is listed as Matthew opens, the coming birth of Christ is announced as one to come through Mary, pledged to be married to Joseph.
 - c. It's in the 18th verse that I find some humor - and maybe it's just me. It says: ***"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."***
 - d. I found myself smiling and asking, "so, when was someone going to fill Joseph in that the woman he was about to marry was going to be the mother of the Messiah?"
 - e. A few verses later he is told, but what took everyone so long?
- E. In these few words recorded for us by Matthew, we are finally **(Slide #7)** introduced to a man by the name of Joseph who up to this point was an ordinary man, but now he is an ordinary man with an extraordinary problem.
- 1. Let's not brush over this lightly.
 - 2. Put Joseph's shoes on for a moment: he has been dating a girl by the name of Mary and fallen in love with her. She is chosen to be his wife and Joseph has, in accordance with Jewish tradition, entered into a formal and legal relationship with her known as betrothal.
 - 3. It is like what we call engagement in our day, but more: it is a legal and formal state that involves a ceremony like a marriage with a Rabbi and at least two witnesses.
 - 4. Once betrothed, the Jewish law then requires that the couple live as betrothed for a period of one year with means they belong to one another, but they do not live together nor is there any sexual union between them.
 - 5. It is so formal that if a betrothal is to be broken, it requires a filing of a divorce.
 - 6. If adultery happens in that one year period, the punishment is the same as if they were married: a stoning to death of the guilty.
 - 7. If the man dies during the stage of betrothal, the woman is then declared to be a "virgin widow."
- F. So, here's the situation: Joseph and Mary are betrothed to one another – legally bound by law, when suddenly it is discovered that Mary is pregnant. **(Slide #8)** JOSEPH HAS A PROBLEM.
- G. It is in the midst of this problem that we discover some amazing things about Joseph, our second stringer of the day. What does our text tell us about Joseph that is noteworthy?
- H. If I could place all that is about to be said about Joseph under one heading, the heading would be this:

(Slide #9) "JOSEPH, A MAN OF INTEGRITY." How so?

II. (Slide #10) FIRST, HE WAS A MAN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS/JUSTICE.

- A. Joseph was a man of integrity first of all because he was a man of righteousness/justice.
 - 1. It says in the beginning of *verse 19*: "*Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man. . .*"
 - 2. "A Righteous Man" - it was not a term used lightly in God's Word.
 - a. It was not used in reference to the Pharisees for their righteousness was earned.
 - b. It was not used just for any church goer.
 - c. It was used in reference to the people who had taken on the very nature of God.
- B. How could we expect anything else from the one who was to raise the baby Jesus from infancy other than a man of righteousness and justice.
- C. Truth is, it is this first distinguishing mark that creates Joseph's dilemma:
 - 1. Joseph was one who understood the seriousness of sin and its consequences - sin was not something to be taken lightly as "something everyone does," but as painful violation of the will of God.
 - 2. Joseph, as a righteous man, understood justice, and in the situation he was in - his fiancé pregnant - he wanted to do what was right.
- D. Listen my friends, the world is longing today for men and women of righteousness and justice who understand the gravity of sin and its consequences and work night and day to walk before God free from sin.
 - 1. It is no small thing that God did when he allowed His Son to come to the earth.
 - 2. It is no small thing that Jesus did when He willingly came and died.
 - 3. Is it too much for God to ask that we in turn commit our every living hour to a walk of righteousness and justice as this same Jesus empowers us to do so?
- E. In a world of moral decay, God is looking for a remnant - men and women of integrity - and that means, first of all, men and women of righteousness and justice!

III. (Slide #11) JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF DISCRETION.

- A. *Verse 19* continues with: "*because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man. . . and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*"
- B. Because Joseph was a righteous man who took sin seriously, he knew that he must do something about the fact that his fiancé was pregnant.
 - 1. Pregnancy doesn't just happen and he had not lain with her.
 - 2. What a shock to discover that she was pregnant.
 - 3. It seemed evident that Mary must have committed a sin with another man.
 - 4. You can almost feel the heartbreak of Joseph - the one he loves dearly has apparently fallen into sin.
- C. But breaking off an engagement wasn't as simple then as it is now.
 - 1. An engagement in those days was a legal binding that practically guaranteed marriage.
 - 2. It was so final that in *verse 19*, Joseph, who is described in *verse 18* as the one "*pledged to be married*" to Mary, is called her husband.
 - 3. The normal approach to such circumstances was quite harsh:
 - a. The woman was brought before the religious authorities and charged with adultery.
 - b. Being accused, she was taken to the public square and stoned, often to death.
 - c. The purpose was two-fold: to deal harshly with sin and to clear the honorable name of the offended one - in this case Joseph.
- D. But with Joseph it was different for he was a man of integrity; a man of discretion.
 - 1. He loved Mary and saw no need to publicly disgrace her.
 - 2. He planned to "divorce" her the quiet way - the signing of papers before two witnesses.
 - 3. Undoubtedly if he had seen the divorce through he would have taken much ridicule because he would have shared the blame for the pregnancy - his name was not cleared.

4. But instead Joseph chose the model of integrity which meant an attitude of discretion.
- E. How desperately we need men and women of discretion in this day and age in this church.
 1. Ones who are not so concerned about their own rights that they are willing to drag others through the mud.
 2. Ones who understand the seriousness of sin to the extent of not shouting someone's shortcomings to the mountain tops to make ourselves look better.
 3. Ones who understand the importance of preserving the dignity of our fellow men and act redemptively instead of in condemnation.
 4. The world's way is to drag someone through the mud, splash their name on the front pages of the paper.
 5. Joseph's models a better way: *"he had in mind to divorce her quietly."*
 - a. This did not excuse sin.
 - b. But it did allow grace to be applied to sin.
 - c. And grace is why Jesus came.
- F. In a world of moral decay, God is looking for a remnant - men and women of integrity and that means men and women of righteousness/justice, discretion,

IV. (Slide #12) JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF PIETY.

- A. In *verses 20-21* we read. . . (READ)
- B. As I read these verses, the picture that comes out is that Joseph was not only a man of righteousness and discretion, but thirdly, a man of piety. How so? I see it in two ways:
 1. I see it first of all in his thoughtfulness.
 - a. the way our modern translations put it seems almost like an afterthought: *"after he had considered this."*
 - b. the Greek makes it much more intense: *"after he had agonized with, pondered over, and prayed about this. . ."*
 - c. We know from the Lukan account that Mary went and stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months - perhaps during this entire time Joseph pondered and prayed.
 - d. His concern was not his reputation but doing the will of God.
 2. Second, we find in Joseph a man of piety because the angels appeared to him.
 - a. My friends, it is those who are most pious who are most likely to encounter God.
 - b. Joseph, a man of righteousness and discretion was in a quandary and needed a voice from God, and a voice is what He received. What did the angel say?
 - (1) don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.
 - (2) what is conceived is from the Holy Spirit.
 - (3) the baby's name will be "Jesus" who will save people from their sins.
- C. In a world of moral decay, God is looking for a remnant- men and women like Joseph who live lives of integrity and that means men ad women of righteousness/justice, discretion, piety,.....

V. (Slide #13) JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF OBEDIENCE.

- A. *Verse 24* reads: *"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him. . ."*
 1. I like that!!!!
 2. The options were now two: obedience or disobedience and Joseph made the right choice.
 3. It was not the popular and easy decision, for Joseph and Mary would face public disgrace and ridicule, but it was the choice of obedience and that is always right!!
- B. Ralph Earl asks a very good question: "How many times do men attempt to frustrate God's purpose by their refusal to obey?
 1. God never asked us to make decisions that would help us win some popularity contest.
 2. God never asked us to necessarily make decisions that would make sense to the human mind.

- C. God is looking for men and women who have convictions and the guts to obey Him no matter what the cost might be!!!
- D. Joseph did not stop again to consider the options; he obeyed God. Why? Because he was a man of integrity!
- E. In a world of moral decay, God is looking for a remnant - men and women of integrity and that means men and women of righteousness/justice, discretion, piety, obedience, and finally.

VI. (Slide #14) JOSEPH WAS A MAN OF SELF-DISCIPLINE.

- A. We read in *verse 25*. . . (Read)
- B. Joseph was a model for us of a man of self-discipline, doing whatever it takes to make sure that in no way he thwarts the will of God.
 1. Even though he took Mary home as his legal wife, he had no union with her which was his marital right - he abstained to maintain the sacred will of God.
 2. And when the child was born, he did not name Him Joseph, JR. but he gave him the name "JESUS"
- C. That type of self-discipline does not just happen. It speaks to me of a life of discipline - something so many of us lack.
 1. It takes discipline to spend time daily with God in prayer and Bible study.
 2. It takes discipline to get out of bed and get to Sunday School and church.
 3. It takes discipline to carry through on God's calling on your life and to obediently offer up and use our spiritual gifts for the Body of Christ.
- D. Quite simply the Christian walk is a walk of discipline, constantly squelching the human nature to act selflessly.
- E. God today needs Christian men and women of self-discipline.

VII. CONCLUSION.

- A. This is indeed a blessed time of year and it is important that we enjoy this time.
- B. It is also important that we remember that Jesus came for a reason - to save us from sin and to create a remnant.
- C. (Slide #15) God is looking for a remnant, but not just any remnant.
- D. The remnant He is looking for is a remnant that is willing to model integrity:
 1. Men and women of righteousness and justice.
 2. Men and women of discretion.
 3. Men and women of piety.
 4. Men and women of obedience.
 5. Men and women of self-discipline.
- E. As I look at the Christmas story, I see one who emulates this very thing: Joseph.
 1. He is the kind of husband I want to be.
 2. He is the kind of father I want to be.
 3. He is the kind of Christian I want to be.
- F. The call this morning as we enter into the Christmas season is for men and women of integrity. (Slide #16) Will you join the remnant?
- G. Mrs. Cameron of ENC writes: Christmas should be the New Year of new beginnings, not Jan. 1. Let us make today a day of new beginnings.