

“Child Safe”

*Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 18th, 2016*

Texts

Isaiah 7: 10-15
Matthew 1: 18-25

Introduction

Isaiah prophesied to a nation on the verge of total collapse. Crooked kings & powerful foreign rulers had brought down the Northern Kingdom; Jerusalem & Judah would be the next to go.

The prophet comforted his nation with promises of Divine intervention. Exiled & besieged families would be rescued; Jerusalem would be restored; after that, peace & justice would reign.

They were words designed to give the people hope.
Violence & war will end;
old enemies will learn to co-exist;
light WILL shine in this place of darkness & destruction.

Take heart, Isaiah urged.
One day, this will be a safe place for children to grow up.

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Children are always the hardest hit victims of war & it is their fate that Isaiah is addressing in this text.

In the ancient Near East, newly weaned babies were fed a mixture of milk curds sweetened with honey. Both were nearly impossible to come by during besiegement or war.

But Isaiah promised that very soon toddlers would be able to eat their proper food again.

Not only would childhood malnutrition be eradicated, the psychological impact of war would also be erased. Little children would no longer be disturbed or de-formed by violence & bloodshed. They would be free to learn right from wrong.

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The disturbing images from Syria that are fill our newspapers & TV screens, give us an idea of where Isaiah was coming from. The impact of war on children is devastatingly cruel.

“Soon,” the prophet promised, “soon babies & toddlers will enjoy happy, healthy childhoods.”

As I read those verses, all I could think about was the children of Aleppo.

Who will see that those children get proper nutrition?

Who will ensure that no more kids in that city have to grow up with PTSD or worse?

We know that the conflict there is breaking God's heart. The misfortune of children moves our Heavenly Parent more than any other disaster on Planet Earth.

From ancient Israelite wars to today's conflict in Syria, to child abuse in our own country, God hates it when children suffer because of sinful adults.

The story of the infant Jesus is handed down to us not for us to create complicated theologies about Divine & human chimeras.

The baby Jesus is God's reminder to all people everywhere that the Holy One is passionate about children.

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Jesus's safety & wellbeing are the principle themes of Matthew's infancy narrative.

It is in this Gospel that we get a glimpse of Joseph's parenting role. We are told how he accepted the child as his own. And how, later, he fled to safety in Egypt with his wife & son – abandoning his parents & his job to protect his baby boy.

Matthew tells us quite a bit more about Joseph but most of us skip over it. We prefer to focus on shepherds & wise men & a new mum who, according to the men who wrote up her perinatal history, suffered no pain or unpleasant symptoms whatsoever.

Mary has been treated shabbily by her son's followers. But Matthew provides us with some thoughtful insights into Joseph & for that we are grateful.

Joseph

As the Christmas story unfolds, Joseph is a young man about to embark on marriage. His family & Mary's family had signed the legal contract or ketubah (*kitb el katab*) & now they were in the one-year betrothal phase of the relationship.

During this year, the young couple remained in their parental homes but were allowed to meet with one another. It was a chance to get to know one's future spouse – discover whom your parents had picked for you; maybe even, find out what they looked like.

Joseph & Mary were still almost strangers when he found out she was pregnant.

Can you imagine how he felt?

Shock & anger, disappointment & grief must have threatened to overwhelm him.

The marriage agreement would have to be cancelled, of course.

Even worse, the Law stated that adulterous women & their lovers had to be taken out & stoned.

Joseph had no choice but to turn Mary into the authorities. That was the law of the land. And Joseph was a law-abiding man.

The Gospel writer makes that crystal clear. Joseph was "righteous" or "just" v. 19 tells us.

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Around the time of Joseph & Jesus, letter- of- the-law legalism was big. The movement was akin to originalists' interpretation of the Constitution. Laws must mean what they meant when they were first drafted. Modern ideas about justice should not be allowed to mess with the original intent of the Law.

That was the prevailing attitude in Judaism when Joseph was wrestling with what to do about Mary.

But in the Jewish tradition, justice had another sense also.

It was not only straightforward obedience to the Law; justice was also the intentional protection of the weak & the downtrodden.

It was this sort of justice that prophets such as Micah & Amos urged.

They told the people that compassion for the needy & the vulnerable pleased God far more than legal or religious zealotry.

A person who tried to act justly might choose to obey the letter of the law. Or, he or she could do what ever it took to protect & provide for those whose lives or wellbeing were at risk.

Joseph practiced the latter kind of justice.

Never mind what the Law said, he would do what was necessary to protect his teenage bride & her unborn child.

Because, let's face it: Stoning a mother-to-be is a surefire abortion method also! If Joseph didn't step up, both mother & baby could be dead very soon.

This decision wasn't made lightly.

He turned the matter over & over in his mind; even when he was asleep, the problem occupied his thoughts.

Much prayer & careful discernment were necessary before Joseph could be sure what was the right thing to do.

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With God's support, Joseph decided to take Mary as his wife & claim the child as his own.

It was an act of profound moral courage.

The Law was not on his side & neither would society be.

Going ahead with the marriage would bring shame & condemnation on Joseph.

He would find it hard to get customers for his building business – at least, amongst his Jewish neighbours.

Even his family might disown him.

Taking on Mary & her child would condemn Joseph to a life of gossip & scandal.

Do you remember what the congregation said in the Nazareth synagogue when Jesus preached there?

"Isn't this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4: 22)

You know exactly what they meant by that!

Even after Jesus was in his 30's, the town gossips remembered every detail about his birth!

Joseph must have known that this was how life would be from then on.
And yet he found the courage to do the right thing!

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian, wrote that Joseph had the kind of authentic faith which is not controlled by the law but that rather *“stands in an absolute relationship to the absolute.”*⁷

Joseph had such a close relationship with God that he was able to ignore what the rulebooks said & obey God's own laws of justice & mercy.
Joseph put his trust in God's love rather than in human legislation.

The Law of Love

I'm very much struck by Joseph's anti-legalistic stance because it was clearly something Jesus advocated also.

Jesus was always challenging the religious folk around him to put care & compassion before legalism. That's what got him into so much trouble.

But, as we study Joseph more, we realize that Jesus must have learnt that lesson from his dad.

Maybe, they even discussed the respective merits of the legal system versus the law of love as they worked together on the job site or in the carpenter's shop.

Jesus knew the importance of putting people before principles because it was the only reason he was alive.

Both he & his mum would have been cold in their graves, if it wasn't for Joseph's love & protection.

Joseph risked public shame, family disownment & financial ruin by marrying Mary & giving his name to her baby boy.

But he did it anyway!

What an amazingly good & strong person!

And therein lies the reason why Joseph is so rarely lifted up in the Christmas story.

That is why he gets pushed to the back of the Nativity scene.

Joseph's response to God's call is a challenge to each & every one of us.

Mary is much less of a threat.

We've sanitized & dehumanized & perfected her to such a degree that no person could possibly emulate her.

But Joseph – he was real flesh & blood.

He worked for a living & tried to improve his family's circumstances by emigrating to a different country with them.

He even experienced shock & anger & grief just like we do.

But instead of giving in to his darkest thoughts & feelings, Joseph managed to rise above them.

He even rose above the legal & moral standards of his day; challenging religious rules & societal norms to do right by his fiancée & her child.

Joseph is the character in the Christmas story who we are all called to copy.

Like him, we must dare to challenge unjust laws & confront discriminatory religious teachings.

We too must be willing to risk our economic & social standing to help the disadvantaged & dispossessed.

Our own feelings – however painful - are not to be used as barricades against the needs or rights of others.

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Jesus was sent to inaugurate God's peaceable & just kingdom.
He came to bring God's *shalom* to the whole world.

But first he had to survive & grow & mature.
That was Joseph's job.

Where in the world would Jesus have been without him?

Without men & women like Joseph, where in the world would anyone be?
Amen

ⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, "Fear & Trembling," quoted by Kenneth E. Bailey in, "*Joseph & the Three Shocks in the Christmas Story.*" The Presbyterian Outlook, December 18-25, 1989, p. 7-8