

## SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

What if he said no?

If you were here last week...oh wait, none of us were here last week. If you had heard my sermon last week, you would have heard me ask the same question about Mary.

You can hear that sermon on our Facebook page if you want to, or read the text on our website...but it's also okay just to move on as we get closer and closer to what we're waiting and hoping for.

This week we come to the other parent of the story. We move from Luke's Gospel to Matthew's so that we can hear his accounting of the origin of the Messiah in very structured Jewish terms.

In the verses before what we heard this morning, Matthew began his story of Jesus by listing the generations of faithful Jewish ancestors who had come before him in his paternal family – all to establish that Joseph's righteousness had a firm foundation. He was the descendent of all these righteous men and women...who weren't always exactly so righteous. If you read the list, besides stumbling over unfamiliar names, you might come across a couple of interesting stories that certainly don't seem like the pinnacle of faithfulness and upright living. Matthew is establishing Joseph's foundation, but it also includes some pretty messy realities.

And now Joseph is facing his own mess, a crisis of conscience, a struggle between doing what he **knows** he's supposed to do according to the law and what perhaps feels like the "right thing to do."

Mary was pregnant. We hear these Advent and Christmas stories that talk **around** the facts of life. The scriptures find creative ways to avoid saying what doesn't seem to be appropriate to say in "polite company", but it doesn't mean we aren't all thinking it. Mary and Joseph weren't yet married so she couldn't **possibly** be pregnant with his child – and there's only one other way that could've happened.

Which puts Mary on the wrong side of the law, facing death by stoning, or disgrace by divorce at the very least. And coming back to my original question, Joseph actually does say "no". He had already made up his mind that he wasn't going to marry her, but he also wasn't going to publicly shame her, so he resolved to dismiss her privately. The verb was written in a past tense – he had made up his mind to tell her to take her child and go, standing firm in his righteousness under the law.

Then an angel shows up. Just then, as he had decided that his own righteousness couldn't withstand the scandal of his unfaithful betrothed, God sends a messenger to tell him, "Do not be afraid". The same words that Gabriel shared with Mary in Luke's story are offered to Joseph in this time of turmoil. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This isn't the mess you think it is. It's still

messy, but it isn't *that*.

From the way the story is written, that's all he needed to overcome his doubt. A divine messenger shows up in a dream and offers scriptural grounding to what he's facing and he's ready to do what God asks of him.

I wish it were always that easy. My dreams usually vary from the nonsensical to the terrifying and I'm not sure I've ever had one that I can clearly identify as a distinct message from God that cleared up all the mess. But there are times I could sure wish for that. There are times I could use some divine intervention to at least offer some direction... if it isn't going to be cleaned up directly.

That's something that I take from this story. Knowing that Matthew was specifically grounding the arrival of Jesus within the history of the Israelites means that it comes in the midst of their messiness – their repeated failures to live up to the covenant, their repeated missteps and **un**righteousness.

It's so easy to sanitize the story when we know – or think we know – the outcome, but these are two very real people facing a very real crisis. Even if Joseph believes what Mary and the angel are saying to him, the world certainly isn't inclined to believe in a miraculous conception when there is the much more believable conclusion that involves adultery and shame.

It's much easier to assume we know what's really happening and just move on as if everything is okay. It's often easier to just ignore the mess.

In 1991 or 1992, sometime during my second year of college, I went to lunch with my roommate and my mom. My mom lived about an hour away from Gettysburg, so it wasn't unusual for her to visit. I don't remember the specific occasion or why my roommate, Dave, was included in lunch that day. But I remember that we were at the Pub – a frequent destination right on the square of Gettysburg. In fact, I think I remember that we were sitting in a booth along the windows that faced Carlisle Street. I can picture it.

I remember the lunch so well for good reason. I don't know how or why the conversation went in this direction, but I can almost feel the moment that my mom said – to my roommate and me – “Well, all of the Frigm women **had** to get married.”

I remember looking across the table at her and saying, “Mom, **you** didn't.” To which she bluntly replied, “Yes, I did. Do the math.”

October, November, December, January, February.

I was twenty years old and I had never done the math between my parents' anniversary (I think it was September 17) and my older brother's birthday, February 14.

To be fair, my parents divorced when I was 14, so it's not like I was paying a lot of

attention to their anniversary as I got older, but it was still quite a shock to learn such a foundational part of their story that had always been there as plain as the calendar...if I had ever paid attention. I'm not sure roommate Dave was glad he was there for that moment.

What I appreciate about that story now – other than the fact that I get to prove very quickly how oblivious I can be – is that it helps me better understand the journey that my parents traveled from high school to Vietnam for one, nursing school for the other, to marriage and parenthood, and all the highs and lows that came after.

The messiness of our lives really isn't all that different from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. I can't tell you with factual proof that Jesus was born the way Matthew tells this story. I find it very likely that there was a lot more going on between the time that Mary told Joseph what was coming and the moment that Joseph understood what was happening...if he ever did.

The story of God is not a sanitized myth about God creating life with a virgin. The story of God, the salvation we hope for, is God at work with and in some really messy lives where righteousness doesn't so easily come from a book, where saying yes to God's messenger means taking on the responsibility and joy of claiming a child.

Matthew very intentionally tells of Joseph naming this child as he was instructed. Because **naming** the child meant Joseph was **claiming** the child. In taking the name Jesus son of Joseph, Yeshua Bar Yoseph, the Messiah truly was part of the generations that came before him, no matter the biological realities. Joseph truly was his father in every sense of the word as we can understand it.

Joseph said yes to that child, so that Jesus would know that love from before he was ever born. So that we would know the love that comes through that child. In all our messes. Always. Amen.