

Detour! - Joseph
Matt. 1:18-25
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Isn't technology great? I'm amazed at all the things we can do now that we couldn't do just a few decades ago. We can literally look up any piece of information that ever existed. We can talk with people face-to-face from other parts of the country. And we can order a pizza and have it delivered while lying on our couch eating the leftover pizza from yesterday. Yes, technology has definitely made our world better.

But, as we all know, there can be hiccups. The ability to get directions, for example. I've shared this story before but it bears repeating for today's sermon. I was using my GPS one time to find a remote church camp in rural Illinois. I was far off the interstate in completely unknown territory, fully reliant upon my little hunk of metal and wires and invisible satellite waves to get me to my destination. I took all the right turns, dutifully obeying the voice commands, even when they sent me down an unmarked dirt road. The road dead-ended into a cornfield, at which point my GPS proclaimed, "Your destination is ahead." I think I detected a bit of a chuckle when it said that. So I shouted at it, "No it's not!" I wasn't at my destination, I was at a dead end.

I think God must love dead ends, because it gives God a chance to show us a new direction. Abraham and Sarah, who are supposed to be fruitful and multiply, are burdened with barrenness. Dead end. Moses led the Israelites to the shores of the Red Sea, but couldn't get across. Dead end. Jesus, the supposed Messiah gets crucified and buried in a tomb. Dead end. In each case, the story could have ended right there, staring at a road that ends in a cornfield instead of at our destination.

That could have happened for Joseph, as well. To fully understand just how off-track Joseph's life becomes, consider where he starts. As our story begins, Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary. This is more than a simple engagement, as we understand it. This is a betrothal, a year-long commitment between a man and woman that carried with it all the binding agreements of a marriage, but without the consummation. At the end of one year in betrothal, the couple was formally married.

So Joseph and Mary were in all senses committed to each other to be married. But when Mary returns from her three-month visit to her relative Elizabeth, Joseph discovers his wife is four months along in a pregnancy initiated by the Holy Spirit. How did Mary decide to share that with her soon-to-be husband? "Honey, I've got some good news and I've got some bad news. The bad news is, I'm pregnant and you're not the father. But the good news is, neither is anybody else!" If you were Joseph, how do you respond to this? He wasn't quite sure what happened with Mary, he only knew it had nothing whatsoever to do with him.

So he faces a decision, one of the most important decisions faced by anyone in the Bible: what to do with Mary and her unborn child? We are told Joseph was a righteous man, which means in Jewish tradition that he was a faithful follower of God's law, so the law gave him his options. He could follow what was laid out in Deuteronomy 22, which says, "If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die." So one of Joseph's options is to expose Mary's apparent transgression and have her stoned to death. Talk about a dead end.

But by New Testament times, that punishment was rarely meted out. So, the only other option Joseph faced, according to the law, was divorce. No matter how much he loved Mary, it was his religious obligation to end the betrothal and sever the marriage contract. He could honor the shaming dictated by the law and expose Mary's sin through a public divorce, humiliating her in front of her family and friends and leaving her future in question. Or he could divorce her quietly, with only a few witnesses, doing everything he could to keep both his and Mary's reputation intact. But he simply couldn't stay with her. This is just a mess for Joseph.

As Joseph wrestles with option A and option B, God presents option C, a detour instead of a dead end. As my GPS would say, "Recalculating route." Through a dream, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife, to take her son as his own, and to give him the name Jesus, which means "God saves us." Ignore what people tell you, ignore what the law tells you, and do what God tells you. Trust that God goes with you down that unknown road.

What should Joseph do? If he chooses God's option, he exposes himself to the severest of ridicule. Shame was a powerful force in Joseph's culture and being shamed could ruin his reputation and his business. So imagine the shame he would subject himself to by walking down the street arm in arm with his wife who was carrying a child that everyone knew wasn't his.

More important than his relationship with his townsfolk was his relationship with his family. What would he be? A father or a stepfather? A husband or roommate? If Joseph believes the angel, everything is full speed ahead. The story can continue. Mary will have a home and a family and her child will be born into the line of King David. But if Joseph doesn't believe, then everything grinds to a halt. If he wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes to the courthouse to file the divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever and the future is in question. This is not the life Joseph had mapped out for himself. This is a dead end.

But we don't worship the God of dead ends. We worship the God of rolled-away stones, of parted seas, of recalculated routes. Remember, the whole point of recalculating our route is to get us back on the right path. That's true, no matter how far off course we get. There is nowhere on this earth we can go that is out of reach of God's signal. No matter how many wrong turns we take, no matter how many dead ends we run into, God is always there with us, walking with us down life's detours, offering us the opportunity to trust in God for guidance. God has given us the tools we need to get on track: God's word as presented to us in scripture, a community of faith in which to find worship, comfort and challenge, even our own consciences, which can help us sort out right from wrong. The tools are there; it's up to us whether we use them or not, whether we trust that God can use a detour to get us back on track.

For the working out of God's plan, Joseph's belief is as important as Mary's, because it is Joseph's decision whether or not to give this child a name that will determine the child's fate. By choosing to name the child, Joseph would exercise his right as the father and acknowledge Jesus as his legal son. Will this righteous, intensely conflicted man speak the name of Jesus? Interestingly, we are never told what he says. We are only told what he does. Despite the consequences, despite the chaos, despite the unknown future, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor says this about Joseph: “The heart of the story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it. He owns this mess, he legitimates it and gives it a name, and the mess becomes the place where new life is born.”

Joseph’s story is often our story. We are presented day after day after day with circumstances beyond our control, circumstances we would never have chosen for ourselves, tempted to divorce ourselves from the belief that God is anywhere in this mess. Every day life throws us a detour and we have to decide whether or not we believe God will walk with us down the path we didn’t choose. But if we listen closely, we may hear an angel whisper in our ear: “Do not fear. God is here. It may not be what you had planned, but God may be born here, too, if you will speak his name.”

Isn’t that funny, that we have some kind of say in whether God is born here this year? C’mon, what power do we have? The same power that Abraham had, the same power that Moses had, the same power that Joseph had: the power to acknowledge that God is in the detour and the power to answer “yes” to God’s call and to claim the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ. Who will save us? Who will walk beside us? Who will take the dead ends and detours in our lives and through them create new life? One is coming this Christmas who offers to do those things, to be present with us in the mess. All we have to do is to choose to speak his name.