

From Generation to Generation sermon series
Choosing the Way Forward – Matt. 1:18-25
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I hate to be a downer during this Christmas season, but there's a new pandemic running rampant in our society and we need to be aware of it. The illness is characterized by acute indecision, chronic regret, and brain paralysis brought on by having too many choices. This isn't Covid; this is FOMO, better known as the fear of missing out.

This is predominantly an American pandemic. In 100 years we have evolved from Henry Ford saying you could have any color car as long as it's black to Burger King saying, "Have it your way" to coffee shops offering 192 ways for you to have your morning drink. I know I'm going to sound like my grandpa, but I remember when there were only three or four channels on the TV, a live stream was what YOU splashed in in the backyard, and the only thing on demand was you when your mom needed something from the kitchen. So, here are some honest questions to which I don't have a good answer: When we had less choices, was life better or worse? Were we sadder or happier? I could make a good argument either way. But I think the sense of entitlement that runs like a nasty undercurrent through our culture is due in large part to us having so many choices that we've come to believe OUR needs are the MOST important thing to US and should be to everyone else.

Our dizzying array of choices in every area of our life can be crippling. Amy and I spent a good half-hour the other night reading reviews, comparing options, and talking through pros and cons before we finally chose... a new house? A car? Nope. A mattress topper. That was time we could have spent flipping through a dozen streaming services deciding which of the hundreds of Christmas movies we should watch! There are so many choices, and yet, we like having choices because it gives us the illusion of control.

But what do you do when a choice is thrust upon you, a decision you would never choose to have to make yourself, but one that will drastically change your life? Ladies and gentlemen, meet one of the most important people in the birth story of Jesus who never even says a word: Joseph. You can't have a nativity without a Joseph, can you? But when you look closely at the biblical narrative, Joseph is barely present. After his non-speaking role is finished, Joseph pretty much disappears from the gospel. And yet, this story doesn't happen without him. Just as Mary had an important decision to make about being the earthen vessel for God's son, so Joseph is faced with a gut-wrenching decision, on which rests the fate of baby Jesus and God's salvation plan.

At the start of our story, 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 during which they both agreed to delete all dating apps from their phone. A betrothal carried with it all the binding agreements of a marriage without the consummation. At the end of one year of betrothal, the couple was formally married. So, Joseph and Mary were in all senses committed to each other.

But when Mary returns from her three-month visit to her relative Elizabeth, Joseph discovers his wife is pregnant, which she said was "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? I'm assuming he is

familiar with how biology works. He isn't quite sure what happened with Mary, he only knows it had nothing whatsoever to do with him.

So, he faces a choice, 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 he would have turned to the law to learn 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.

By Jesus' time, that punishment was rarely meted out. So, the only other option Joseph faced, according to the law, was to end the betrothal with a divorce. No matter how much he loved Mary, it was his religious obligation to 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. That is not a choice.

As Joseph wrestles with option A and option B, God presents option C. 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. Option C.

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. Imagine the reaction when he walked down the street arm-in-arm with his wife who was carrying a child that everyone knew wasn't his. What would others think when he told them the baby was literally a gift from God?

More important than his relationship with his townsfolk was his relationship with his family. What would he be to Jesus? A father or a stepfather? He was so looking forward to taking Mary as his wife. Now, would he be her husband or roommate? If Joseph believes the angel, everything is full speed ahead. The story can continue. 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. Joseph has a choice to make.

Life is made up of such choices. I know a lot of people whose lives have been changed by one wrong decision. We all know people who have lost their jobs, their homes, their friends, all because of one bad choice. That's all it takes, right? We all have at least one thing in our past that we regret, a memory that haunts us, a decision we would give anything to undo. Even if we've survived the consequences of it, we still know what happened, and we can never go back and change it. The good news is that the God we worship is not only the God of the future and the God of the present. God is the God of the past, which means God's forgiveness stretches backward, covering our past actions and altering how they shape our lives.

What will Joseph choose? For the working out of God's plan, Joseph's belief is as important as Mary's womb, 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 and claim this child that he knows isn't his as his own? 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. He chose to follow God's leading, regardless of the consequences.

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, when an angel whispers 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." I bet none of us are where we thought we would be five years ago, even one year ago. Things are different than we planned; some are better, some are worse, some are unexpected and unplanned. And yet, God is with us, and promises to be with us again this Christmas. And we can choose to claim that promise if we speak Jesus' name into this world, not just with our mouths, but with our hands, our hearts, our choices. Jesus' name is invoked in ways that separate, that judge, that exclude. Is that who we know Jesus to be? Can we be courageous enough to stand up to those voices and speak the name of Jesus as we know him? When we choose kindness over judgment, we speak the name of Jesus. When we choose to give some of what we have so others can have enough, we speak the name of Jesus. When we choose to let our faith take precedence over our social status and political affiliations and outdated prejudices, we speak the name of Jesus. Here's the thing: We know he's going to be born again this year. Will we claim him as our savior? It's not always convenient. It may change our lives in unexpected ways.

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 Joseph had: the power to acknowledge that God is in the mess and the power to answer "yes" to God's call and to pass on the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ. Who will save us? Who will walk beside us? Who will take the messes in our life 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. Life may not be what we planned, but God isn't done with us yet. Christ is coming to make a way for us. All we have to do is to choose to speak his name.