

## ***We Can Choose a Better Way* – Matthew 1:18-25**

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**December 11, 2022**

In light of the story for this morning, I spent some time thinking about people who have done the right thing in an adverse situation. Sometimes, those “right things” rise to the level of courageous. I found a few examples that are compelling:

When asking the question, “What is the greatest act of courage?” the *Atlantic* magazine published a series of examples they believed qualify (*Atlantic*, May 2019):

It is hard to top the incredible bravery of Witold Pilecki, a Polish soldier who in 1940 volunteered to join a German roundup so that he could report on what was going on inside a newly established concentration camp. That camp was Auschwitz.

More famously, in October 1962, the world held its breath for 13 days as we teetered on the brink of nuclear war. Threatened by Soviet missiles just 90 miles from Florida in Cuba, and under unimaginable pressure to act, President Kennedy chose restraint and resolute statesmanship. It was courageous.

In a different example of courage, Ben Barnz, the author of *We: An Adoption and a Memoir*, wrote: “It is the intimate, personal acts of courage that most inspire me. My two greatest heroes are the biological mothers of my children. The choice they made to place their children for adoption was and is gloriously courageous—and the ripple effect continues 17 years later.” Expectant mothers who put their kids up for adoption: it’s amazingly courageous. And selfless.

We’ve talked about Mary quite a bit—her courage in carrying and giving birth to a child who would be the savior of the world. And today’s story is more about her fiancé, Joseph, who also shows a remarkable commitment to choosing a better way in a very tough situation.

Matthew tells us that when Mary and Joseph were engaged but before they lived together (translated: had sexual relations), she was found to be pregnant. Mary was an unwed mother-to-be. That was not good in

the eyes of the culture around her. And it probably didn't cast Joseph in a good light either. For all everyone knew, they had had sex before marriage. And she had become pregnant because of it.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was committed to "dismissing her quietly" in an effort to keep her from being publicly disgraced. For all he knew, she had been unfaithful to him and broken their marriage contract.

But then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to, indeed, keep with the original plan and take her as his wife. The child is from the Holy Spirit, the angel told him.

What was Joseph thinking? First, did he believe what the angel was selling? It was a dream after all. Was this all real? Did he believe Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit? And second, was he willing to take direction from the angel, who instructed him to follow through and take Mary as his wife?

It would've been much easier on him, if he had just followed his first instinct—cut Mary loose and kept it as quiet as possible. He could've gone back to a quiet life of carpentry and not been bothered and inconvenienced by this woman who has somehow become pregnant.

Imagine how the Christmas story would've unfolded had Joseph dismissed her. Mary would've therefore been all alone in carrying this child, would've been even more vulnerable. How would she have travelled? Would she have secured that place in the stable by herself? Would she have even made it to that inn? Without the assistance of Joseph, would she have even survived the journey of childbirth in those primitive conditions with nobody to be beside her and look after her?

Would the savior of the world still have been born? It's hard to say; God has a way of working out God's plan no matter the circumstances. But the story would have been severely altered regardless. Maybe Christmas wouldn't be Christmas as we know it.

Dismissing her would've left Mary in a very vulnerable position. Yet, he couldn't be sure she hadn't been unfaithful to him. What was he to do?

Imagine the moments after the angel gives him instruction. He's got some time to ponder all this probably after he wakes from sleep. In the

end, he makes the decision to stay by her side. He puts his personal well-being at risk to do what he felt was right. It was important to protect Mary, and it was important to do what he felt he was being compelled to do by a higher authority.

He chose a better way. He chose something bigger than himself.

I wish, as I'm sure you all probably do, that more of us would choose the better way when it comes to how we interact with each other.

Choosing a way of anger, bitterness, and selfishness is such low-hanging fruit when it comes to the work we need to do. That's the easy way out. Putting ourselves first may make us feel good, but it comes with a price—never finding resolution and long-term peace with an individual or a community of people and causing harm for somebody who often gets caught in the middle.

There is a better way.

The choices we make, and the choices made by those who preceded us, have lasting impacts.

I think of the choice that two small Presbyterian congregations made in the early 80s to merge into one church, a congregation called Farragut Presbyterian Church. Instead of limping along individually—with the comforts that come with keeping to yourself—both churches chose the better way for their long-term health: merging to become one. It's a choice that has benefited all of us four decades later.

I think of the choice that endless caregivers make to remain by the sides of their injured, sick, and aging loved ones. It would be so expedient and easy to leave them behind for others to deal with and find thrills and good times for themselves instead. Yet, they make the better choice because it's simply the right thing to do.

And I think of people who choose to make the hard choices of restraint—restraining from speaking words that hurt, making judgments that divide, and making decisions that only bring short-term pleasure rather than long-term prosperity.

These choices impact not only the people around us, but they have a chance of impacting the generations that follow us—in our families, in our churches, and in our communities.

After Joseph made his decision to take Mary as his wife, we don't know how his thoughts evolved over the course of the journey to Bethlehem and beyond. He could very well have had some lingering doubts about the choice he made. All we know about are his actions.

And by all accounts, he remained steadfast in his commitment. He chose to play the long game. He chose the better way for the long term, not the choice that necessarily felt good in the moment.

And because he did, the savior of the world was born safely and grew into a boy and into a man who had a profound effect on his community, his friends, and on humanity far after his death and resurrection.

When it seems that the proper way before us is one of revenge, short-term pleasure, or staying comfortable, there might be a harder way. But it's probably the better way.