

Sunday 6th December 2020
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Matthew 1:18 – 25
Theme: “The *courage* of Joseph”
“Be strong and courageous!”
(No. 2 of “The values of Christmas: courage”)

Introduction:

I've always loved that Children's Song we heard before by Colin Buchanan, the song, “Be strong and courageous”:

**Be strong and courageous
The Lord of the Ages
Holds all His little ones safe by His side
Be strong and courageous
The Lord of the Ages
Holds all His little ones safe**

This song is based on the words in the Old Testament: on God's words to Joshua, son of Nun:

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for I the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go (*Joshua 1:9; cf. Deut. 31:6*).

And Paul echoes these words in the New Testament, when he says at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians:

Be alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong (*1 Cor. 16:13*).

This is our focus this morning: on the fact that we can “be strong and courageous”, because we are God's loved children, and He is *and will be* taking care of us through thick and thin.

In this, Joseph is very much our example of courage.... That's our theme for this morning as we continue our look at “The values of Christmas, *and the Christian life, as we follow Jesus*”. Last week, our focus was on the faith and the “obedience” of Mary. This week, our focus is on the faith of Joseph which showed itself in courage, *and courageous action for God*.

Part 1: The courage of Joseph

Well, let's first look at the situation that Joseph was faced with. Last week, I reminded us of what happened to Mary, the young girl betrothed to Joseph. By the way, betrothal was sort of like our engagement. At the age of about 12-13 years old, a young girl was betrothed to a slightly older young man: the young man was about 18 years of old or so...

Joseph was probably chosen by Mary's parents to be Mary's husband. In the ceremony of "betrothal", the couple pledged themselves to one another for marriage, but for the betrothal period of twelve months, the young girl continued to live in her parent's house, *and there was no sexual intercourse between the couple for this period of time.*

The betrothal constituted a legally ratified "marriage" in our terms. After the betrothal, Mary was legally Joseph's wife, and "any infringement of his marital rights could be punished as adultery" (*Brown, Birth of the Messiah, p. 123*).

This, then, was Mary's situation prior to the visit of the angel Gabriel. How did Mary feel about her situation? We're not told. But surely as a young woman of her time, she would have been looking forward to a future in her village, around her family and relatives, as the wife of Joseph and the mother of several children.

Mary's future plans, though, were very much upset and changed, as we *heard last week*, by the arrival of a messenger from God, the angel Gabriel. He told her that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit of God, and that she would give birth to a child who she was to name "Jesus", a child who would be called "the Son of God" (*Luke 1:30-35*).

Now this was rather stunning news for a young teenaged girl. Mary responds to the angel's news with amazing faith and "obedience". She says to the angel:

"I am the Lord's servant. May it be happen to me, as you have said" (*1:38*).

And what does Mary do next? Do you remember? She goes off to visit her aged cousin, Elizabeth, to check out whether Elizabeth is pregnant, too, as the angel Gabriel has said she is. The movie, "The Nativity Story", shows Mary asking her parent's permission to travel to see Elizabeth in "a town in the hill country of Judaea" (*Luke 1:39*), and then travelling there with another family as a carer for that family's children....

Anyway, three months later, Mary returns to her home town of Nazareth (*Luke 1:56*). And we saw what happened, didn't we, on the excerpt of the movie *The Nativity Story* that we watched earlier.... Joseph, her betrothed, was stunned to see that the woman that he planned to spend the rest of his life with was pregnant, *presumably to some other man who she has been involved with....*

Matthew in our Bible reading sums up the situation by writing:
Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. **When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child** of the Holy Spirit (*Matt. 1:18, Aland, "Synopsis"*).

Matthew then goes on to give us an account of things then from Joseph's perspective. *Obviously, Matthew's source for all this is someone close to Joseph, maybe someone from Joseph's family....* Matthew writes:
Joseph was a man who always did what was right (*lit. "being a just man"*), **but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately** (*Matt. 1:19*).

Joseph figures that Mary has been 'playing up' with some local lad, but rather than disgrace Mary in front of everyone, he resolves to break the engagement in private. By Jewish Law, according to the Old Testament, Joseph could have accused Mary of adultery and the punishment for this was being stoned to death (*Deut. 22:23-24*). A harsh punishment, but that was the penalty in the society of the day for adultery, *and it seemed to all and sundry that this was what Mary had been involved with.*

But Joseph has mercy on Mary, and decides simply to break the engagement quietly. Maybe he has heard from Mary her protestations that she hasn't slept with anyone, but the child is a gift to her from God. Maybe, he just loves Mary.... Whatever, he decides to end the relationship secretly and quietly.

But before he can do this, Matthew tells us:
While he was thinking about this, or maybe "while he was fumed over this matter", an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus—because he will save his people from their sins (*Matt. 1:20-21; cf. Bailey, p. 46*).

In the DVD *The Nativity Story*, Joseph has a dream in which he sees Mary about to be stoned to death by the people of the town as he is returning with some wood for his carpentry business. In his dream, he is given a rock with which to help stone Mary to death, but before he can do anything with the rock, a man, an angel from God, appears in front of him and tells him that the child is a gift from God by the Holy Spirit. After the dream, Joseph goes off and finds Mary, and says, “I believe you” and “Come into my home as my wife now, and together we will care for this child of God”. It’s moving stuff....

Matthew sums it up this way:

So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, lit. “he took his wife (home)”, as the angel had told him to do. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus (Matt. 1:24 – 25)

By the way, just following on a little bit... Why do you think Joseph took Mary with him to Bethlehem to register for the census? (*cf. Luke 2:1-5*). I like the suggestion that Joseph does so because “he was unsure what might happen to...Mary if he left her in Nazareth without his presence to protect her” (*Bailey, Through Middle Eastern Eyes, 46*)

The movie *The Nativity Story* takes this line of thinking too. *Although, they have it as Mary’s idea....* The writers of this movie have Mary say to Joseph, “I will go with you!”, when Joseph learns that he has to go to his home town of Bethlehem to register.... Why would she decide to do that, and not stay in Nazareth and give birth to her baby, surrounded by her family and attended to by the women of the village? Probably because her family and her relatives in the village still don’t really believe her when she says that she is pregnant by the “Holy Spirit” (1:35). But Joseph does believe her (*Matt. 1:24; cf. 1:20 – 21*), and it is with her husband to be that Mary wants to be at this time.

I think that it’s wonderful to think about the circumstances leading up to Jesus’ birth.

I think that Joseph very much is the hero of this story.... In fact, without his courage and his heroism, Mary would probably have been stoned to death, and there would be no Christmas.

Listen to what one writer says about Joseph:

Joseph is...not a passive mute figure *in the events leading up to*

Jesus' birth. Rather, he acts as a strong, thoughtful person whose bold decision at a point of crisis saves the life of the mother and her unborn child.

And he goes on to say:

In his cameo appearance, Matthew presents Joseph as a human being of remarkable spiritual stature. He possessed the boldness, daring, courage, and strength of character to stand up against his entire community and take Mary as his wife. He did so in spite of forces that no doubt wanted her stoned....

It behooves us to see Joseph as a hero of the story without whose courage... there would have been no Christmas story to tell (*Bailey, p. 44, 46*).

Part 2: Courage in the Bible

And, of course, Joseph isn't the only example of courage that we have in the Bible, a courage that flows from faith in God as our Loving Carer....

Looking back at the Old Testament, I think *for instance* for of those two examples in the book of Daniel:

- * The example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in their refusal to bow down and worship a statue of King Nebuchadnezzar....

They faced being thrown into a blazing furnace as a result. Hear again to how they answered the King when he said, "Do you think that there is any god who can save you?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered:

"Your Majesty, we will not try to defend ourselves.

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it.... But even if he doesn't, Your Majesty may be sure that we will not worship your god, and we will not bow down to the gold statue that you have set up" (*Dan. 3:16-18 TEV & NIV*).

What amazing courage, a courage that flowed from their faith, their trust, in the God of their ancestors, *the God who had rescued them from slavery Egypt, given them the rich and fertile land of Canaan,* and the God who they know would go on caring for them, His people.

They trusted in God, who had shown His love for them in the past, and who they knew would care for them in the future.... Like the Psalm writer they believed that:

**The Lord is good;
His love is eternal,
And his faithfulness lasts forever** (*Psalm 100:5*).

- * The example of Daniel himself in his refusal to stop praying to God, even when the King Darius had issued an order saying that “for thirty days no one be permitted to request from any god from any man except your Majesty” and that “anyone who violates this order is to be thrown into a pit filled with lions” (*Dan 6:7 – 8*)....

Remember what Daniel did with a courage that flowed from his faith in God? He went on praying, and as a result was thrown into the lions den, *where God protected him by shutting the mouths of the lions* (*Dan 6:10 – 21*).

And looking at the New Testament, I think of the many examples of courage there, a courage that flowed from faith in God as their loving Father:

- * The example of Jesus himself, who courageously walked the road to the cross, trusting in God his Father (*Phil 2:5-11; Heb. 12:2*).
- * The example of Peter and John as courageously defended the Good News of Jesus in the face of intense opposition from “the members of the *Jewish Council*” (*Acts 4:13; cf. 4:31*).
- * The example of Stephen in courageously confronted the Jewish Council with the message that they had killed God’s righteous Servant, Jesus.... Remember how he faced being stoned to death.... He cried out:
“Look! I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right-hand side of God!” (*Acts 8:54-56*).
- * The example of Paul and Barnabas in courageously speaking with boldness the Good News of Jesus to members of the synagogue in Perga (*Acts 13:46*).

I could go on and on mentioning the courage of people in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus.... And I shouldn’t stop without mentioning the bravery of Paul himself who was whipped, stoned, imprisoned,

shipwrecked, and much more for the sake of the Gospel, *a courage that flowed from his faith that God would care for him 'through thick and thin'.*

Exhortation:

Let's move now from Joseph's story, and the story of faith and courage of so many people in the Old Testament and the New Testament, to our story....

We too can be "strong and courageous" as we face this Christmas and the coming New Year, and all that comes our way, *because we know through Jesus that God is our dear loving Father, and that He will care for us, too, 'through thick and thin'.* We can be "strong and courageous" in facing:

* **Situations of adversity**

Remember how Joseph courageously stood up for Mary in the face of the anger directed at Mary for her apparent infidelity.... And how the many people who I have mentioned faced adversity....

We too can face the adversity of sickness, suffering, the loss of loved ones, *whatever happens to us,* with courage!!

* **Scorn from one's peers**

Joseph and Mary combated scorn and ridicule from people in their village, because of Joseph's defense of Mary, and his marriage of her *in the face of her apparent pregnancy to another man....*

As did many of the people of courage who I've mentioned.... And we most certainly will this Christmas and in the future as we courageously stand up for Jesus....

* **Refusals to listen to the Gospel**

As we proclaim the Good News of Jesus this Christmas to our family and friends, we should expect to face an unwillingness to listen, and even ridicule.

Remember the people of faith and courage who we've focused on: Joseph; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo; Daniel; our Lord himself; Peter and John; Stephen; Paul and Barnabas.... They didn't give up because of a little opposition, because they knew that the God of the Ages was on their side.

Conclusion:

As Colin Buchanan sings in his children's song:

Be strong and courageous

The Lord of the Ages

Holds all His little ones safe by His side

Be strong and courageous

The Lord of the Ages

Holds all His little ones safe

Be strong and courageous because "the Lord of the Ages hold *you* safe"!