

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

**Joseph's Side of the Story**  
**Matthew 1.18-25**  
**December 21, 2008**  
**Amy Jacks Dean**



Dads don't get very much credit. It's true. Perhaps it's because the mother is so "great with child." Perhaps it's because the mother physically carries the bundle of joy right out there in front of everyone. Perhaps it's because the mother's belly becomes public domain for people to touch, pat, rub, even talk to – complete strangers even. Perhaps it's because the mother labors – literally – to bring this new life into the world. Perhaps it's because the mother can provide the needed nourishment to sustain life. While all of those perhapses are legitimate, it's still sad that Dads don't get very much credit. And so it is with Joseph. In my research and study I found more about Mary than I could use in twenty sermons. But Joseph? Not much of anything at all. He was a righteous man. Well good. It was Joseph's lineage that connects Jesus to the Davidic line. Well good. It was Joseph who was betrothed to Mary, the mother of Jesus. He was a carpenter. That's about it. Mark doesn't even mention Joseph at all. John speaks of him twice. Luke barely makes note of him. Matthew is the most we get. Some scholars presume that Joseph died before Jesus' ministry began since he is not mentioned at all past these few birth notations. (Mercer's Dictionary of the Bible, page 468) Mary, on the other hand, sings her own song. Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and when the two women, both great with children meet, Elizabeth's child – John who would become the Baptizer – leaped in her womb. Mary ponders things in her heart. Mary makes requests of Jesus later in his ministerial career. Mary was at the crucifixion. Mary rides the donkey. Mary needs a place to deliver. I could go on and on about Mary. But Joseph? I don't have much there. Surely he must have a side to his story.

Matthew's telling of this tale places Joseph as a brief leading character. Since that's about all we have to go on, let's hang out with Matthew for just a little bit. As Matthew relays this story, "only the narrator and the angel speak. Joseph and Mary have no speaking parts, and Mary has no active part at all. The only action is that of the angel, representing the divine initiative, and Joseph's obedient response." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring, page 136) "Matthew . . . by selecting Joseph as his leading actor stresses the active component in the human response. Three times Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream, and three times he must *do* something." (Interpretation, "Matthew," Douglas R. Hare, page 8) "Thus Joseph stands, at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, as a model of what Matthew hopes for all disciples – indeed, for each reader of the Gospel. Joseph is already facing the "you-have-heard-that-it-was-said-but-I-say-to-you" tension that will be displayed in the Sermon on the Mount – the tension between the prevailing understanding of God's commandments and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. By Joseph's decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, he is already living in the heart of the law and not its letter, already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom. In a difficult moral situation, he attends to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his previous understanding of God's will in favor of this word from the living and saving God." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring, page 136-137)

You see, Joseph had all authority to not only leave Mary, but to publicly disgrace her – perhaps even ending with a public stoning. But, the text says, he was a *righteous man*. Now when I am preparing a sermon, I read and read and then reread the text – over and over and over again – trying to see something that I've never seen before: some new insight, some new word, some new something that might serve as an "aha" kind of moment. And of all texts – these that

are most familiar to us need even more of that kind of attention. Because, you see, sometimes we think we already know this story backwards and forwards, we don't really pay attention. Well this week I found a phrase that I've never noticed before. The righteous man Joseph, not wanting to publicly disgrace Mary, *planned to dismiss her quietly*. Enter Angel of the Lord from stage right. The divine word comes after Joseph had finally made up his mind how he was going to handle this mess he had gotten himself in. He would *dismiss her quietly*. "While this was not a death sentence, realistically, it was a sentence to a life of wandering and destitution for Mary. No one would want to marry her, with a child born out of wedlock. She would be 'damaged goods' in a society where there was no safety net for such women. She would be – terrifyingly – on her own. The best she could hope for would be a life of servitude in someone else's home. ("Faith and Doubt, Hope and Fear, Joy and Sorrow – and Dreams," Lisa Bellan-Boyer, Professor of Religious Studies at Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, NJ)

*Dismiss her quietly*. Given the context and culture, Joseph's plan at first glance may have seemed like grace. But it was not, and the Angel of the Lord sounded the alarm and said one of the most important phrases in all of Scripture: *do not be afraid*. Joseph's side of the story teaches us this Christmas lesson: Don't dismiss her quietly. Don't dismiss him quietly. Don't dismiss them quietly. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those who are different. They may dress differently, talk differently, act differently. They may live in different neighborhoods from us or have different kinds of jobs than we do or come from different family systems than us. They may have different customs and come from different regions. Christmas teaches us that we can't dismiss them quietly. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those who make us nervous. Maybe it's the color of their skin. Maybe we've watched too much violence on TV and live our lives assuming that everyone is a possible attacker. Maybe stereotypes have taken over our lives. Perhaps they wear a hijab (the Muslim head covering for women) or a bindi on their forehead or earlocks or some kind of strange head covering. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those who make poor choices. The pregnant teen – seems like we've heard that story before. The one who keeps falling off the wagon. The one who spends money when they don't have it. The one who lives life as if they have no choices when in actuality they just don't like the choices they have. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those who bore us. They talk too much. They don't talk at all. Their interests are not the same as ours. We have nothing in common. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those who are ill. With contagious disease. With mental illness. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those with whom we disagree. Democrats. Republicans. Libertarians. In this post season of political fervor, we must admit that sometimes we simply turn off those whose views differ from ours – locking in on one station only to listen to those who speak our positions and completely ignoring the other side. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Those who grieve. When will they get on with their lives? When will they get over it? You don't get over it, you get through it, and because we don't know what to say, we usually say nothing. That's the same as dismissing them quietly. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

Ourselves. Down-playing our own strengths. Ignoring our own needs. Whom do we dismiss quietly?

God. Perhaps especially in this holiest of seasons – we are too distracted or too busy or too tired or too preoccupied or too troubled or too self-absorbed. So yes, as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus – we dismiss him, for if we acknowledge what his coming into this world means to us and for us – we will not be able to dismiss others because in our following Jesus we see that no one is dismissible – not even a young pregnant teenage girl.

Every time we stereotype and label. Every time we check caller ID and silence the ring without answering – now I've done gone to meddling! Every time we roll our eyes or murmur under our breath. Every time we pretend that we didn't see someone and scurry down another aisle in the store. Every time we pass the person with the "will work for food sign" or the guy ringing the Salvation Army bell without giving any help – every time we do any of these things, we are joining Joseph in his original plans to *dismiss her quietly*. How can we possibly be ready for Christmas when we dismiss all the Mary's that cross our path?

Keep alert. Wake up. For our paths are crossed multiple times every single day by people that live lives of quiet dismissal. If we are not careful, we will be tempted to join Joseph in his original plans. We have confused getting ready for Christmas with the commercialism and consumerism of the day. We must prepare our hearts with Hope. We must ready our spirits with Peace. We must fill our lives with Joy. And we must practice Love. In order to be fully ready for the celebration of this coming Thursday, we must hear the Angel of the Lord say to **us** again: *do not be afraid*. Homelessness is not contagious. *Do not be afraid*. Poverty is not catching. *Do not be afraid*. AIDS does not make one untouchable. *Do not be afraid*. Different will not harm you –

it might just enrich you. *Do not be afraid.* Did you hear it? *Do not be afraid.* This is Joseph's side of the story. When those words were spoken to Joseph, here is what the Angel of the Lord went on to say: *She will bear a son, and, you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

Ever since I noticed that phrase that Joseph *planned to dismiss her quietly* I have taken note of my actions. It is frightening how many people I dismiss quietly – even if only in my own heart. And every time I do it – and every time you do it, because I don't think I am alone – it is the same as Joseph's plan to quietly dismiss Mary. But this is not the way of God. This is not the Christmas story. The Christmas story is a promise to include everyone. The Christmas story is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. So, good for Joseph for not following through with his initial plan. He didn't dismiss her. He stayed with her. We still don't know very much about Joseph, while the Blessed Virgin Mary has taken the seat of honor – but we know enough not to dismiss his role quietly. May it be so.