

**“JOSEPH’S CHOICE”**  
***Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25***  
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Our lives are filled with decision-making and choices. Some of these decisions are inconsequential and make little difference — what will I have for breakfast, what will I wear today, which television program will I watch? Other choices are more significant. Some choices that we make, or that are made for us, affect our future and the course of our lives. At times we all face major decisions, for example, the decision to go to college and which college we attend; our decision to become involved in a relationship that eventually leads to marriage; career decisions — things like that.

Earlier this fall my wife and I attended a delightful production of *Fiddler on the Roof* at Cleveland Heights High School. With a cast of over 200, it was a dynamic show. As you know, the plot of *Fiddler on the Roof* involves the town matchmaker and what happens when Tevya’s daughters want to follow the leading of their hearts rather than to agree to arranged marriages, which have been the custom, the tradition for centuries.

The marriage of Joseph and Mary was no doubt an arranged marriage. They all were in those days. In that ancient Jewish culture, a daughter, once she reached puberty, was promised to a particular man who would be her future husband. Mary was fortunate indeed to be promised to Joseph, described by Matthew as “a righteous man.” An observant and law-abiding citizen, Joseph the carpenter was a model of goodness and propriety. He was also quite capable of providing for a family. Anyone would want his or her daughter to marry this man!

But now the plot thickens. Scandal comes not only to Wisteria Lane, but to tiny Nazareth, as it is discovered that, lo and behold, Mary is pregnant, and Joseph is not the father. Now in order to more fully understand the implications of this statement, we have to go deeper into the cultural ramifications. I have already said that Joseph was a righteous man, a law-abiding citizen. Joseph knew well what he had to do. Harsh as it may sound to our modern ears, the law of Moses, Deuteronomy, chapter 22, describes in graphic terms what is to happen to a girl who becomes pregnant out of wedlock: death by stoning.

I always thought that Joseph’s plan to “dismiss Mary quietly” was his way of getting out of a relationship he assumed wouldn’t work out in light of the circumstances. But actually, Joseph was being merciful. He was allowing Mary to stay out of the limelight and not be punished publicly.

Joseph was already willing to follow his heart rather than the letter of the law when he had a dream. In that dream, an angel appeared to him and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For God has something wonderful in mind for her and for you and for the whole world!”

“Do not be afraid?” That’s easy for you to say! Do you know what the gossip will be in this little town? And who do you think is going to believe the part about the Holy Spirit being the father of Mary’s child? And so Joseph finds himself in a dilemma. His whole world seems to be falling apart. Have you ever felt that way? Of course you have! On this Sunday before Christmas you may feel that your world is coming unglued right before your very eyes. Things don’t seem to be falling into place for Christmas this year. The kids are sick, the stock market’s unpredictable, the housing market is shaky. Every phone call seems to be about someone else

who is ill or has received a discouraging diagnosis. And we have no angels appearing to us in dreams. We just have to muddle along!

Well, Joseph had to muddle along, too. He had a decision to make, a decision that would affect the rest of his life. Would he agree to what the law said and expose Mary to the harsh treatment of the Jewish law? Would he do the compassionate thing and try to get out of this engagement quietly? Or would he, could he do the God thing and marry this woman and trust that what the angel had told him was true? Would he, could he be the step-father of the Savior of the world?

I believe that Joseph struggled hard with that decision. I don't think it was as simple as one brief angelic statement that made him change his mind. The whole weight of all he had been taught, his whole world view of the Torah as the way of life was suddenly confronted by a situation he never wanted to face. He had the choice of someone's life in his hands. He had the option of obeying or rejecting Scripture in his hands.

It all boiled down to this: would Joseph cling to the old righteousness that understood life in terms of absolutes: of hard and fast, black and white? Or would he embrace God's new righteousness that would eventually be fully known in the ministry of Jesus — a righteousness based not on the rigidity of law, but on compassion and love?

How many sleepless nights do you suppose Joseph had? How did he handle his feelings? Who did he talk to? Did he seek out his rabbi for counseling? Did he talk to his buddies at work? I'm sure they were full of advice! Did he drown his anxieties in alcohol or use other avoidance techniques? The Bible doesn't say.

When the angel came to Mary and told her she would be the mother of Jesus, the Bible describes in great detail what Mary said and what she did. Mary talked with the angel. She asked questions. She responded with an affirmation. Then she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, and the two of them sat down and talked for the next three months! (Check it out; it's right in the Bible!) Mary composes a song, and sings it, and it gets published! It's called The Magnificat, and people are still singing it today.

Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus. In great contrast to the verbosity of Mary, Joseph responds to the news in a totally different way. Do you know that there is not one quote from Joseph in the Bible? Not one recorded word! Now, Joseph undoubtedly talked to somebody, or how would we know what happened with the dream and the angel and all. But we do not have one quotable quote in any of the four Gospels from this man. It's easy to cast Joseph in the Christmas pageant! There are no lines to learn. Mostly you just have to stand there!

Joseph was a man of few words, but I am not making fun of Joseph this morning. Just the opposite. I am lifting up Joseph as a model of faithfulness, for Joseph's actions speak louder than his words. I want to suggest to you that **Joseph is a model of obedience, a model of devotion, and a model of hope**, not only for his family, but for us today.

First of all, **Joseph is a model of obedience to God**. We know the story. Joseph decided not to do the legal thing, or the politically correct thing, but instead to risk his reputation, his career and his future and do the right thing, the God thing. He chose to take Mary as his wife and to raise Jesus as his son. I know blended families where the dad and the mom treat the kids not as if they are your kids and my kids, but our kids. It is a beautiful thing to observe. How old do you think Jesus was before he found out that Joseph was not his real father? I don't think Joseph ever made an issue of it. When Jesus was in the Temple at twelve years old, the Bible tells us that his parents became concerned and started looking for him. Joseph did not say, "He's

your kid, Mary.” No, the Bible tells us that they searched for him together and rejoiced together when they were reunited as a family.

Yes, Joseph models for us the kind of costly discipleship that God sometimes requires of us. When in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, “Not my will, but yours be done,” do you supposed that he’d heard that somewhere before? Joseph, who had every intention of being a father, was told that he would be a step-father instead. “Not my will but yours, God,” was his attitude. We don’t know for sure that he said that, but we know he did that, for his actions spoke louder than his words. What a role model for Jesus. What a role model for us.

What faith it must have taken for Joseph to trust that Mary’s baby would grow up to be the Savior of the world! As he gazed on baby Jesus lying there in the straw, could anything be more unlikely? He looked so vulnerable, so fragile, so special, yet so ordinary. How could it be?

Second, Joseph provides for us **a model of devotion** to his wife and family. One of the commentators I read observed that Joseph lived with many unanswered questions and a whole lot of love. That’s what God asks of us, too, sometimes. There are so many things in this world that we do not understand: tragic accidents, people who are diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses and are taken from us in the prime of life, little children who are abused and orphaned and homeless. The list goes on. We trust that someday, somehow we will be able to understand all that life puts before us, but right here, right now, like Joseph we are given an incomplete picture and asked simply to trust God. Joseph, a man of few words, was able to do that. Are we?

Third, Joseph is **a model of hope** in a world desperate to hear good news. It’s easy to get bogged down with all the negative things that are going on in our world. But all is not gloom and doom. For a child is born, a baby has come into the bleakness of a poor town in occupied territory. According to Joseph, this baby is special. That’s what they all say! I’ll be glad to show you pictures of my kids, even though they haven’t been babies for a long time! But this child is special, insists Joseph. This child will be the savior of the world.

What did it take for Joseph to hold on to hope as he journeyed with Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem? What did it take to keep on believing when there was no room for them in the inn? You told me that he will be the savior of the world, God, and there isn’t even a decent place for him to be born! What did it take to trust that as he grew, this little fellow who played in the saw dust on the carpenter shop’s floor would amount to something someday? Yes, Joseph is a model of hope, the hope we need to have in our hearts this day and every day.

As we light Joseph’s candle this day, let us think not only about what happened long ago and far away, but follow the example of Joseph. Like Joseph, we are called to trust God, even when our world seems to be falling apart. Like Joseph, we are asked to do the right thing, no matter what the cost, no matter what the consequences. Like Joseph, our actions speak louder than our words. We need to think about what we say, but also about what we do, each and every day.

God challenged Joseph. Joseph made the right decision, the right choice, and his life became a blessing to the whole human race. God challenges us as well. The choices we make today will affect not only the course of our lives, but the lives of others as well. Let us put our faith and trust in God, and do the right thing — this day and every day!

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*Prayer:* Lord Jesus, make us expectant and eager to do your will, even when it disrupts our world, just like Joseph the carpenter. Prepare us to have our lives change and our world rocked by your advent among us, just like Joseph. Lord Jesus, give us the grace to live as you would have us live in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, just like Joseph. Lord Jesus, make us ready to receive you, ready to have you be born into our lives, and ready to pick up and move to wherever you might lead us, just like Joseph. Amen.

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