

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Be of Good Faith

What word would best describe Joseph? The Bible doesn't say a lot about Joseph, the surrogate father of Jesus. We have Joseph in our nativity scene, and this Joseph has a receding hairline, not as advanced as mine, but then Joseph was much younger than me when they cast this plaster image of him for our church. But I get the receding hairline; Joseph probably started losing his hair quite early, and not just due to male-pattern baldness but probably because he was dealing with a lot of stress. In fact Joseph might have been pulling a lot of his own hair out. And the word that I would use to describe Joseph would be "longsuffering."

And part of what made Joseph longsuffering was what we just read about in the text today. He's engaged to be married and his fiancé ends up pregnant. Now where I grew up people would be talking about that – and people probably did talk about that when I Hyesun and I were married, because as some of you know we had two weddings; one in South Korea for her family, and on in the States about six weeks later for my family, and by the time we had our wedding in the States Hyesun was pregnant and we knew it, so people we knew could do basic math and didn't know about our wedding or Korea might still be talking.

But I can hardly compare this with what Joseph must have been going through. His betrothed is pregnant and it is not his child. And Mary's explanation about the angel and the Holy Spirit probably went over like a lead balloon. And here, in today's text we get the first insight into Joseph's character. He had a choice to make; he could do the "righteous" thing, which would have been to expose Mary to public disgrace in order to keep his good name, and Mary would have been dealt with "righteously" which means she would have been executed by stoning. That was what the Law demanded, and following the Law was a righteous path to take – and by the way, I don't want to be dismissive of Mary; SHE would have been dealing with far more stress than Joseph because her very life was at stake – not just her "honor." But our scripture passage is dealing with Joseph who certainly had his fair share of trouble to deal with.

So Joseph's first option was to expose Mary's infidelity which would result in her execution. Joseph's other option was to dismiss her quietly – to end the engagement, return whatever dowry her family had provided, and gotten on with his life and looked for another bride. And like I said,

we get a little insight into Joseph's character here. He didn't want Mary to die, although her life would have been pretty tough as an unwed mother, and her family would have suffered for her apparent indiscretions. But Joseph considered this the best, most compassionate option.

But then this angel shows up in his dream and instructs Joseph to take an even-more-difficult path: Take Mary as his wife and raise the child as his own. In order for Joseph to follow that path he would need to put his own hurt and his own doubts behind him and move forward in faith – faith in the angel and faith in his betrothed. Any doubts or regrets that Joseph may be feeling will have to be kept below the surface for the sake of his wife and child – and so I say Joseph is longsuffering.

But once he makes the decision to do what the angel tells him to do, you might think things would get easier for Joseph. They don't. That blasted angel doesn't mention anything about the census that Rome mandated during Mary's final month of pregnancy, telling everyone that they have to go to their hometown to be counted, or that there would be no vacancies at any of the hotels they could afford in the greater Bethlehem area. And once Joseph and Mary get past that hurdle they find out that the king is sending out his hit squad to kill their baby. At this point you'd have to say Joseph and Mary too are beyond longsuffering – they're long longsuffering, ultra-long suffering.

I have no doubt that sometimes we feel that we are longsuffering as well. I think each one of us can look at our own lives and see chains of struggles that are similar to those that Joseph and Mary encountered. I'm sure all of you here have either said to yourself or moaned out loud, "It's just one thing after another." When will it all end?

It doesn't end at retirement, and there are a few people here who can attest to that. Money doesn't relieve you of suffering – in fact sometimes it can lead to *more* suffering. Talk to some of our young couples here – has a good marriage and beautiful children brought an end to your struggles? I didn't think so. Life's struggles persist – and I hope I'm not making you all feel too depressed. But it's the truth. Life is like a Star Wars series; at the end of each episode, some things are resolved, but then some new difficulty arises that won't get resolved until the next movie is made, and then the next movie ends with more loose ends. The challenges keep arising; once you resolve one issue, six more arise. Once you've destroyed one death star you discover that a new one is under construction. What keeps you from giving up and saying, "I surrender: hail Lord Vader"?

The answer is faith. Faith keeps you engaged in the struggles. Faith is actually what the season of Advent is all about. Faith in the promise made by prophets of God that we will come to a day when all these struggles will end – no more struggling to scrounge the rent, no more dealing with the character flaws that I didn't realize my spouse had, no more riding on donkeys for days and days when you're eight-and-a-half months pregnant or having to flee for your life because some ruler is out to assassinate you. Faith that the world is not going to stay broken forever. Faith that tomorrow will be a better day than today.

And though such faith does nothing to rid us of the struggles and the challenges we face day to day, such faith enables us to EMBRACE those struggles and challenges, because we CAN look ahead and know that God is doing something in our midst.

None of us can see beyond our own lifetime, but in the life of a child we can dream. Right? We can imagine what *that child's* future holds even though we won't be around to see it. Joseph and Mary faced a lifetime of challenges, one right after another, but they faced them knowing that a

promise was being fulfilled through their baby. Joseph probably died before Jesus even began his ministry. Mary probably died when Jesus' followers were few and far between, when they were being arrested and persecuted. Could Mary and Joseph imagine that one day there would be billions of people coming together to worship and honor their son Jesus, that there would be churches in nearly every village on earth, that hospitals, schools, shelters, and universities would be ministering to the needs of countless numbers of people all because of this little baby of theirs who was born in a manger? Church leaders are nervous these days because of lower membership, lower attendance, few people giving to the church. Compared to what Joseph and Mary were going through, that ain't nothing. So my message to you who are here today, to worship and praise God for his mighty act in Jesus Christ, be of good faith! If God could get Jesus into the world despite everything that was working against him and his mom and dad, he can certainly keep the Church alive and kicking, and he can certainly bring us through a lifetime of challenges. And he will.