

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^[a] 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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;^[b] and he named him Jesus.

Have you ever had a dream like that?

I actually don't typically remember my dreams. I'll wake up and remember that I had a dream. But I won't remember what it was about most of the time. Once or twice a year maybe, I'll remember a part of a dream, and that's about it. But I had one I remembered this week.

On Monday morning, I woke up from a nightmare that it was Sunday morning and I hadn't printed the bulletins. That's one of the things I'm doing right now while Diane is out of the office. And I'd been doing just a small part of her job for a week at that point. After seven days of Diane's job, I was already having nightmares about it. (So please, tell her how wonderful she is when she comes back).

The good thing about that dream was that after I woke up from that and sat straight up in bed and continued freaking out for a second... I looked around and I said to myself “oh... that was a dream! It wasn't real.” And I got to lay my head back down and relax for a few more minutes before I actually had to get up. In the grand scheme of my life that dream didn't matter. It was an anomalous blip on the radar for a second but then it was gone. I knew everything was going to stay the same because I knew my dream wasn't real.

Joseph's dream was significant. He might not have known right away that it was going to be significant for us. But he knew it was significant for him. He shows us that he knew it was real. Because it changed a decision he had already made. And it changed the course of this entire life.

But let's back up. I want to talk about three things this morning and the first one is the backstory on Joseph.

We don't really know a lot about Joseph. In fact some of the things we think we know about him are just assumed. Watch this. What did Joseph do for a living? He was a carpenter, right? Maybe. It's actually just as likely that we translated the word "builder" incorrectly and he worked with stone rather than with wood. We don't actually know that 100% for sure.

We don't know for sure about Joseph's family. We have two different accounts of Jesus' genealogy in the books of Matthew and in Luke. And tradition has ascribed those one to Mary's lineage and one to Joseph's. But we're not 100% on that.

And Joseph is a little bit of a mystery after this. The last time he shows up in scripture is in the story of Jesus when he is about twelve and he stays behind in the temple after the festival of the Passover in Luke 2. Joseph just disappears, and there are some things that hint that Mary is a widow. He's not there with her at the wedding in Cana when Jesus performs his first miracle. He's not there at Jesus' crucifixion when he as a Jewish man would legally be responsible for Jesus' body, and instead another Joseph, Joseph of Arimathea takes responsibility for this, and Peter is given responsibility for taking care of Jesus' mother.

So basically almost all of what we know for sure about Joseph is in this passage we just read.

We know he is getting ready to marry Mary. They are on step two of this three step marriage process. And that's going to be a little bit of a theme here, that Joseph is on step two. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. He and Mary are betrothed. This is step two out of three. But it's not like what we do these days. Because you could say we have a three step process as well. A couple decides they're interested in each other and they begin to date. Things are going well, he pops the question, they become engaged.

The engagement lasts just long enough to plan a wedding. And then a phrase you hear a lot in wedding homilies and toasts is the phrase "we're excited to see Mary and Joseph start their life together." At their wedding, at the beginning of their marriage we say they are "starting their life together."

But in first century and earlier Jewish culture marriages were not always, but most likely arranged. Step one of becoming married was engagement. An engagement was a contract, generally between the father of the bride and the father of the groom. And it might happen as early as childhood. Mary and Joseph could have been engaged since they were children or toddlers or infants.

And so the couple would be engaged for a long time until they were older when they would become betrothed. And betrothal was a much bigger deal than engagement. It would last about a year, and the couple would each still continue to live with their own families until their wedding the following year. But at this point they had all the same legal rights as a married couple. And you couldn't just break this off like an engagement. The only thing that could end betrothal was a legal divorce. Which again, was a big deal. A huge, public, shameful, big deal.

So here's Joseph. Betrothed to Mary. And righteous. Verse 19 says he was a righteous man. He was somebody who knew and followed God's law. And the writers of scripture didn't throw that word righteous around lightly.

And so here's Joseph. Righteous before God and discovering this situation where he certainly thinks he is righteous. He is right. And she is wrong. Because to Joseph who doesn't know the end of this story yet, if Mary is pregnant and he is not the father, there has to be another human man involved. And so he knows what a righteous man is allowed to do. But I think *-oddly enough-* it's Joseph's righteousness that takes us into the heart of this story, which is Grace.

I say "oddly enough" because we tend to think that if we're righteous we don't have a need for grace, right?

This week I was rewatching the sermon videos from Annual Conference last May. And if you think it's weird to watch sermon videos in your spare time, you're right. But I was. And our evening speaker this year was Bishop

Gregory V. Palmer, who was the Bishop of the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church, is now the Bishop of the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church, and previously served as the President of the United Methodist Council of Bishops. It's a big deal to be elected Bishop in the United Methodist Church. But the entire Council of Bishops elected him to give the Episcopal address at General Conference in 2012. So that ought to tell you something about his preaching ability.

So I'm going to show a video of Bishop Gregory V. Palmer speaking to the North Carolina Annual Conference last May, and I would encourage you to get on the NCCUMC youtube channel and watch both of his messages to us from this summer. They are amazing. But he told us a story of a woman named Diane who had been a youth in Bishop Palmer's wife's Sunday School class back in the 1970s. And in that Sunday school class she was *that kid*. You know that kid, right? Maybe you've been that kid? Maybe you are that kid? So we're going to pick up this clip where Bishop Palmer gets the rest of that kid's story.

[Clip]

What do you have that you have not received?

Bishop Palmer eluded to it, but that's Grace. What God gives to us. God's undeserved forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation.

And like many things in the Church and in Christianity and especially in Wesleyan theology, Grace is threefold. John Wesley and other gave us names for God's Grace experienced in different times. Now God, who created time and lives outside of time, his Grace is always and forever the same. But for us humans who live linear lives within time, we experience that in different names, and that's what Wesley gave name to.

Do you remember this from Confirmation Class?

Our experience starts with Prevenient Grace. God's Grace that goes before us before we even know what God is doing or that God is doing it. He is working in our lives and drawing us to him before we are aware of it.

And God's Justifying Grace is what Wesley would call the Grace of Conversion. Now we all have a Conversion story. Like Bishop Palmer said,

even if you grew up in the Church your whole life, it's not about that. Whether you have a dramatic story and a singular encounter with Jesus like Paul on the Road to Damascus, or one moment in a larger narrative that you can pinpoint, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, or if your road takes years or a lifetime for you to see it, and maybe there's not that one definitive moment along the way, we all have a conversion story. Wesley's conversion story was something that happened after he was a believer. It was something that happened after he was a pastor. The timelines that we impose aren't important to God. What's important is that we recognize that we have a conversion story and that's where we identify God's Justifying Grace.

And that's where we pick up with Joseph. But righteous Joseph, following God's law, Joseph who has experienced God's Justifying Grace, is not at the end of his story. In fact the beginning of the story for us is Joseph experiencing God's Sanctifying Grace. God's Grace that makes us holy. Makes us more like him. And we all need to be more like him. We the righteous need to be more like God. We the reprobates need to be more like God. And Joseph needed to be more like God.

Joseph has already made up his mind in this story. His betrothed is pregnant and he knows he's not the father. So he is going to do what the Law allows and his culture demands and he is going to divorce Mary. But the passage says that he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. He could ask for her to be punished. Publicly shamed. Even stoned to death. But he's unwilling to do that. Unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. Dis-grace. Now that's a funny word.

Rather than hand her over to Dis-Grace, he hands her grace. Joseph who understands God's Justifying Grace is going to quietly divorce her. He'll go his separate way and that will be that. But God. As Bishop Palmer says "But God!" God shows up. The angel of the Lord, which in the Bible many times is just a poetic way to say God- God shows up in the dream and offers his Grace.

One of the beautiful things about United Methodism is our understanding of Grace. And another one is the layout of our worship service. We don't quite use the formal language of it in this service, but if you look at your bulletin you'll still see it. A United Methodist service of worship is composed of four parts. The Entrance, The Proclamation, The Response, and the Sending

Forth. If Joseph's life was laid out like a worship service, this dream is the Proclamation. And whatever he does when he wakes up is a response. The UMC website says that God's Grace is *always* an opportunity for us to respond. And Joseph could say to this dream something like Ebenezer Scrooge says in A Christmas Carol to his partner Jacob Marley in his dream: "There's more of gravy than of grave to you." Joseph could say "There's more of gravy than of grace to you. This dream is because of a little undigested dinner. It's not real. I won't do anything different." And that would be a response.

But Joseph chooses to say "Okay, God. I get it. I'll do it." I'll do more than what God's Law requires or allows, I'll do what God's love invites.

Joseph believes the dream. But he lives into the dream, he lives into God's Sanctifying Grace by extending Grace to Mary.

This is not a story of Joseph believing. Or at least it is not solely a story of Joseph believing. It's a story of Joseph doing.

The United Methodist Document "Our Wesleyan Heritage" says

United Methodists insist that faith and good works belong together. What we believe must be confirmed by what we do. Personal salvation must be expressed in ministry and mission in the world. We believe that Christian doctrine and Christian ethics are inseparable, that faith should inspire service. The integration of personal piety and social holiness has been a hallmark of our tradition. We affirm the biblical precept that [as the Book of James says] "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead"

Faith without works is dead. Faith without works is not nonexistent, it's just dead. And "dead" is another biblical way of saying "stuck in sin," Joseph's faith, Joseph's believing the dream was true and doing nothing about it would be a sin of omission.

But Joseph's response was to be beyond righteous. To be beyond Justified. Joseph's response was to be Sanctified. To live into and to extend Sanctifying Grace, to be a little bit more like God and like God intended him to be. He found out Jesus was coming and he chose for his own story not to be over just at step two. He chose for his story to just be beginning.

Christmas is coming. Jesus is coming. May we respond in God's Grace so that our story isn't over. Amen.