

## Joseph's Scandalous Righteousness

This morning we are only a couple of days away from the day that we celebrate with the world this season. The scene as we imagine it that is depicted in the cards, on church yards, and in movies is real and present in our minds. We are so familiar with the story of the birth of Jesus that we don't ever question the quite frankly many odd things found within the gospel accounts. One thing which we rarely consider is that only one of the gospel accounts actually describes the birth itself: Luke. In our weekly discussion group on Wednesdays, we have talked of the themes and resources we use for preparing our messages. An Advent Study by Cynthia M. Campbell was mentioned which highlighted the differences in our gospel accounts. This study was titled: Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes. As we all prepare and decorate our homes for the season, the author considers how the gospel writers prepared their narrative to describe and welcome the story of Jesus. Mark's gospel is the simplest and most unadorned as the gospel of Mark begins with Jesus as an adult come to the river Jordan to be baptized. The gospel of John begins very poetically with Jesus as the Word in the beginning with God. The approach to this home is somewhat mysterious, but when it comes into view it is beautiful and cloaked in light. There are no birth announcements by angels to shepherds or natal stars signaling the event to those watching the skies for significant events in two of the four narratives about Jesus which appear in the nativity scenes we so lovingly display. Luke's narrative is the one which forms the basis for the story we retell every Christmas Eve. It is in Luke's narrative that we find most of the figures which appear in the nativity scene. In Luke's narrative we hear of Mary's part in the coming birth; we even hear of the birth of the one who is to be born to "prepare the way" for her child. Her cousin, Elizabeth, thought to be barren, will bear the one who will be the voice in the wilderness calling for repentance. There are a lot of details there, but there are no adjectives given describing any special characteristics which fit these folks for the roles they will assume as parents for these special children. Zechariah and Elizabeth were called "righteous before God" but they were not chosen to parent the Messiah, but John the Baptist. And their righteousness is not given as the reason they were chosen for this role. No reason is given. When the angel comes to Mary, Luke only tells us that the angel Gabriel greeted Mary as "favored one! We are told that she is young, usually translated as virgin, but nothing else about her. She is not even described as righteous, only favored. If we in today's reading we have all that Matthew has to say about the nativity of Jesus: Matthew 1:18—"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph but before they had lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." This actually does not tell us anything about the nativity itself: the location or any of the events which Luke describes happening at the time are not found in Matthew's account. Matthew is not concerned with the details of the birth, but about God's purpose in bringing it about. The promised Messiah was to be from a branch of Jesse, so Joseph's qualification seems to be established in the genealogy. So that is where Matthew begins and he begins with Joseph. As Joseph takes center stage in the gospel reading this morning, there are several adjectives which are applied to him which can shed some light on his role. He is in the Greek: *dikaios* which means just, righteous or upright. Joseph knows the requirements of God's covenant and he follows them. He is, to the best of his ability, in right

relationship with God. Perhaps this explains his unwillingness to put Mary to shame. Joseph is also called a son of David, descended from the house of David which like the Isaiah text from last week showed the importance of the Davidic line to the Messianic expectations. So God has chosen Joseph to be the “earthly father” of the coming Christ child. But why this particular Joseph of Nazareth in Judea? Only God knows, for this aspect of the story echoes through many other biblical happenings also. When the angel appeared to Mary and called her “favored one”, she was perplexed by this greeting. God’s choice of human agents baffles not only the people God picks, but often everyone around them as well. As we consider this familiar story, it seems it invites us to wonder as well if we are open to the possibilities of how God want to use us? How God might be using those around us. There is an educational curriculum most often used with children or youth, but really quite helpful for all ages called Godly Play. It presents various Biblical stories as narratives and then asks questions about the narratives called “I wonder questions”. These questions invite the listener of the story to place themselves within the narrative...where are they in the story of God’s work? When we think about the various people God has chosen to use to carry out God’s purpose, it opens the possibility that we might be surprised at whom God is choosing to work with and through in our own time. But as we read further in this text, it seems like there may be a problem. According to Luke, Mary was “much perplexed” by the angels greeting, but it seems that Joseph’s response to the news of Mary’s condition was more than perplexed, and was not at all favorable. What Matthew tells us about the situation is this: Mary and Joseph are already considered married according to the rules of their culture. They are “engaged” but not yet living together, but the marriage contract has been signed, so Joseph is her husband. Yet since they are not living together—Mary should not be “found to be with child”—this is a scandalous event in a small village. Joseph is described as a righteous man. According to the law, Mary should be punished—in fact, she should be put to death, if the child is not claimed by Joseph. God chose to move the salvation narrative forward in a way that it is unlikely that Joseph really would have desired to select. Joseph, just and upright, son of David, makes up his mind as to what he will do in the face of this unwanted reality. Like us, when confronted with this type of thing, Joseph prayerfully discerns the next right step in an impossible situation, a situation in which there is no good choice, but only what feels like not the worst one. He will dismiss the pregnant wife—the one who is carrying a child who cannot possible be fathered by him—quietly. His envisioned future with Mary is upended. His anticipated life with her is no longer possible given the painful circumstances. This is a situation which probable resonates with us from some painful time in our own lives. When we have suddenly found ourselves like Joseph, bereft at the obliteration of what we anticipated, invested in and hoped. We struggle to accept the new reality and then muster all the energy we can and attempt to manage the unwanted turn of events. We even seek to do so faithfully, carefully, with as much fairness and moral integrity as possible. While we may not be able to make the best of it, we can at least try not to make it any worse. We do triage of the situation as we wonder about or dread what comes next in our newly arranged lives. We don’t often think of this story in terms of this wrestling to make sense of impossible, uncontrollable, inexplicable experiences. Yet for Joseph, it was. Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream with a message from the Lord telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. God has

chosen to do something salvific through something that was chaotic in Joseph's life. Part of what makes Joseph righteous is his willingness to set aside his own upright plans and embrace this strange message from God that appears to run counter to all previous divine commands on the subject. The radical part of this story that we often miss amidst the pageants and poinsettias is Joseph's decision to jettison his whole life's commitment to closely following the law he has followed; to what he fervently believed was the right and faithful thing to do in a painful situation and instead step into the new thing God was doing. Of course this only foreshadows what will come: Jesus will eat with sinners. He will heal on the Sabbath. Gentiles will be engrafted into the covenant. Jews and Gentiles will eat at the same table. God will continue to upend the expectations of humans about his love and his ways. God will continue to do this through unlikely people the self-righteous will find offensive. Those God chooses will often, like Mary, find themselves perplexed at being chosen. And sometimes righteousness may appear to be scandalous. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.