

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;
Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-15

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Joseph was a righteous man.

We don't know a whole lot about Joseph. As we read the other Gospels, we do learn a few things: we know that he was a hometown Bethlehem boy; we learn that he was descended from David; and he was a carpenter. But what really, truly, matters, is that Joseph was a righteous man.

I think when we hear that word "righteous", we tend to get it wrong. I think that when most Americans hear that word, they think of "self-righteous", but that's not what it means. It doesn't really mean "legal", or even "politically correct", but "righteous" is someone who is morally upright, someone who knows the right thing to do, and does it. Joseph was a righteous man.

He was betrothed to Mary. Now in that time and place, betrothal was more than just a promise between two people, as it is today. It was almost a legal standing, with agreements reached on both sides. As a general rule, these were arranged marriages. Betrothal also meant that the woman could come and live in the man's house, usually with his family, because she was going to be living there anyway after the formal religious ceremony took place. But what sometimes happened in those situations was that, even though they weren't yet married, she was living in his house and sometimes . . . well, it turned out that the firstborn child of that household perhaps might not take the full nine months after the marriage ceremony to come to term. But Joseph didn't even want a hint of impropriety to be assumed between him and Mary, and so Joseph, being righteous, didn't let Mary move into his household. Matthew's gospel is very specific about that.

Mary, we know, was a young woman. It was the norm in that time for woman of the ages of fourteen, fifteen or sixteen, to become betrothed and married. For the men, it was a little later, seventeen, eighteen, maybe as late as twenty. The gospels are very specific that Mary is a young woman. They aren't at all specific about Joseph. There are two main schools of thought: the first was that Joseph was a young man, because that would be the norm of that day. The other, though, is that Joseph was an older man. Let's even go farther than that and say that he was an old man, that he was a widower with grown children, past his prime, not interested in conjugal relations with his spouse. This line of thought allows for Mary to remain a virgin for her entire life, but there's no real biblical background for that. All we really know is that Mary is a virgin when she gives birth to Jesus, and Joseph had no relations with her before Jesus was born.

We know Joseph's business – he was a carpenter, he's referred to as a carpenter and Jesus is referred to as a carpenter's son. We know these things about Joseph. We know, too, that apparently shortly after their betrothal, Mary went off to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She's gone for three months, comes back, and is visibly pregnant. Well, Joseph had a few choice words to say about that fact. Betrothal meant that he did have some legal rights. He could legally take Mary down to the market square, announce that she was pregnant by someone other than him,

and then leave her to the crowd who, more than likely, would have picked up a few stones and had a really rockin' good time. He didn't do that.

He could have allowed the baby to be born, and then allowed it to die at birth; because it wasn't his, he could do that. He didn't do that, either. Rather, he chose to send her away quietly; to allow her and the child to live. Maybe it meant that he cared for her. Maybe he was worried about his own reputation. It's hard to tell.

But in a dream, God speaks to Joseph through an angel. An angel appears to him and says, "Joseph, you need to listen, because this child that your betrothed is carrying is the child of God. She is pregnant not by some man, but by the Spirit. And this child, more importantly, is going to be the savior of the world."

I have to confess that if one of you fine folk were to come to me and tell me that you had a dream in which an angel of the Lord spoke to you, I would listen very intently. And when it was safe, I would leave the room . . . and try to get some professional help for you.

But Joseph knew that God was speaking to him. He probably didn't think, "Wow! This is in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy from seven hundred years ago!" We don't get that from our reading. What we do have reported, though, is that Joseph, being a righteous man, did what God commanded. He married Mary. He helped her birth a son. And he named that child Jesus. Joseph was a righteous man.

Doing the righteous thing is not easy. I'm sure it was not easy for Joseph. I'm sure that he endured a lot of grief from his family, from his acquaintances, from friends, from the townspeople for putting up with either an unfaithful fiancée or a really whacked out dream. But how often are we ourselves put in a situation where we know what the righteous thing to do is, we know what the righteous reaction is . . . but then we pause, we wait, we rethink.

Perhaps we see something at the grocery store: a package slips into a pocket, or incorrect change is given at the checkout counter. Maybe at work, office equipment goes home; non-office hours are marked down. Or perhaps a neighbor has a "guest" over when the spouse isn't there, or borrows tools never to be seen again.

But what if that grocery package is slipped into the pocket of someone who is desperate for food? What if that equipment is going home so that person can work at home and take care of a seriously ill loved one? What if that "guest" to the neighbor's house is trying to encourage them in an unfortunate home situation? How do we know the righteous thing to do?

Joseph relied upon faith. And prayer. And guidance. More importantly, Joseph remembered he was not alone in trying to figure out what is righteous. For in the words of the prophet, as they rang in his heart, as he heard the angel proclaim them to him, "Emmanuel – God with us"; in all that we do, wherever we go. God was with Joseph as God, too, is with us today in the bread and wine, in the blood and body; in the gathering of the fellowship, in the sending forth and in our witnessing. God goes with us. God goes with us. Emmanuel in our hearts so that we, like Joseph, might be that witness. So that we, like Joseph, may go forth and be righteous.

Amen.

Copyright © 2004, John H. Brock. All rights reserved.