



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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**"Righteousness Under Pressure"-Real Faith for Real People Series**

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**M**atthew 1:18-25 - *"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins."*

*<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."*

*<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a Son. And he gave Him the name Jesus.*

How's the ramp-up to Christmas going? Only seven more days which, of course, means for us men that we have a whole six days before we even

think about shopping!

Christmas in our culture is often filled so with many moments of great fun. For most of us it's about the joy of being generous and giving to others, as well as singing great joyful songs. Simply put, it's a time where we feel better than we normally feel. As one American writer put it, "Blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love." (Hamilton Wright Mabie) That's what it feels like sometimes at Christmas.

At the first Christmas there was indeed a lot of joy and love: angels singing, people praising God, etc. But in emphasizing all the joyful stuff, we can easily overlook how for one man the coming of Jesus almost ruined his life. That man is Joseph, Mary's husband.

Not many Christmas sermons focus on Joseph, but I want to do that today because I think, in looking at his part in the great story of Christmas, we will find qualities in Joseph that are both challenging and inspiring for our lives today.

Over the past may weeks we have been discussing what it means to live out a real faith for real people in the real world. And the story of Joseph shows us a great deal of what that really means. Let's look

deeper into the verses we just read from Matthew chapter one.

First of all, to gain a deeper appreciation for who Joseph was and to understand why this is such a pressurized situation for him, we must understand the culture of his day. To overlook the cultural issues is to miss the anxiety and even terror that is woven in between these verses.

In verse 18 it says Mary was "pledged" to be married to Joseph. In those days parents usually arranged marriages and contracts were negotiated between the families. After this was accomplished the individuals were considered, for all intents and purposes, married.

But in the "pledge stage" they did not begin to live together. Being pledged was sort of an in-between state between engagement and marriage as we might think of it today. While "pledged" the woman continued to live with her parents and the man with his for one year. This one year waiting period was, in part, to demonstrate the faithfulness of the pledge of purity concerning the bride.

If she were not faithful in this "pledge" period, the marriage would be annulled or nullified through a divorce.

Or she could be even be stoned to death as the standards of Old Testament allow.

A section in Deuteronomy 22 covers marriage violation. If a woman who is pledged to be married is unfaithful, it says: "she shall be brought to the door of her father's house, and there the men of her town shall stone her to death." (That will keep you from sneaking out the back door at night!).

With all this custom and verses in mind imagine the night Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant. Imagine how nervous and scared she was given the reality of Deuteronomy 22! And imagine the conflict within Joseph. Imagine how hurt, angry, betrayed, and bewildered Joseph was. Imagine how absolutely broken his heart was. It must have been the worst night of his life.

Think about it. Joseph's dream, his vision for his life, is now in shambles. His view of Mary is now shaken to the core. His view of the future that he had planned out in his head is now shattered into a million pieces. And to think that the cause of his broken heart and shattered dreams was Jesus Himself!

Why does stuff like this happen? Why would God act in a way, which He knows would cause a scandal and hardship? Why shatter a man's heart and reputation in the process of doing God's work? Not something you would expect God to bring about especially in the life of a righteous person.

In verse 19 Joseph is described as a "righteous man." The Hebrew notion for a righteous man means Joseph was known by his community for his uncompromising obedience

to the Law of Moses. That meant, in part, that Joseph didn't eat unclean food. He didn't mix with the wrong kinds of people. He didn't keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra bucks. No one is making the mistake of offering him a pork chop when he comes over for dinner.

In that culture such a moniker meant he was a man *other men* wanted to be. It meant that although he was a peasant carpenter in the eyes of Roman culture, he was admired and looked up to in the eyes of Jewish men.

So now this great guy with a great reputation and just a genuine good soul is faced with this unthinkable scandal. He is caught between his love for the law of God and his love for Mary.

It reminds me of a pastor friend of mine, who was a godly man, who did everything he could to raise his family well and serve God as a missionary in some of the most difficult and poorest places in the world. But one day his single daughter came up to him and declared, "Daddy, I'm pregnant." He said it felt like his whole world changed in that moment. And I think Joseph knows that jolted feeling when Mary gave him the news.

But in our story notice that even though all the evidence points to something scandalous and terrible, and even though Joseph is righteous man and lives by a high standard, retribution and condemnation are not in Joseph's heart.

Read again Matthew 1.19: *"Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he*

*had in mind to divorce her quietly."*

This verse is amazing for several reasons. First of all, at the end of the day given the situation, he decided that divorce had to come. No surprise there. That's the expected thing for a righteous man to do in his day in that type of dilemma.

But what is *not necessarily* expected was that he wanted it to be done quietly, secretively. Meaning it would be done in the presence of only two or three witnesses and not in the front of the town, which would have been his right to do so.

And secondly, "divorcing quietly," also meant he would divorce her without assigning a cause to the divorce. This is a huge thing because it means that he didn't want to explain to anyone all the details why he sought the divorce, which *saved Mary*, not him, from prolonged disgrace.

He could have chosen to do the more typical thing and take Mary publically before the community leaders at the city gate and make his accusation. Such an act would have saved his reputation and perhaps brought him some sort of justice. Granted, Mary didn't sin, but Joseph doesn't know that yet. We all know the backstory when we read this episode, but for Joseph, he thinks she has sinned.

But Joseph's brand of righteousness in the face of sin was deeper than gaining pure justice or following the letter of the law, or throwing someone under the bus to save his skin and to look good to the community. Joseph's righteousness was jammed packed with God-like compassion.

Use this audacious phrase “God-like” because of what we see of God’s character and action in the face of sin. In Psalm 103:8-10, it says this: *“The lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.”*

Doesn’t that sound a lot like Joseph? Doesn’t that sound a lot like how Mary was treated? Doesn’t it sound a lot like how you want to be treated?

In fact, isn’t this a big point about why Christmas ever happened in the first place? Because God’s *first response* to sin, to error, to brokenness is not disgust, is not anger, is not hostility. It’s compassion. It’s graciousness. It’s love. We worship a God who delights to show us mercy.

Yes, God is holy and righteous, yet “He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.” This too is what righteousness is all about in real life in a real world.

At its heart, the Christian life is about not rule keeping so you don’t sin, but its about love and God’s concern for the sinner. And Joseph has that same concern for a woman he thinks has sinned against him.

Think about it, (and this blows my mind), even in the face of a horrible, hurtful and embarrassing scandal and shattered dreams, when *his* reputation on the line, who is he thinking about? Who is he most concerned about? Mary!!! No wonder God chose *this guy* to raise the Savior of humanity!!

All he is thinking about in his worst hour as a man is what would be *best for Mary*. He is concerned about how to save *her* from disgrace.

Ladies what are you *thinking* of Joseph right now? What do you think of a guy who having the right to just hammer you, decided instead to treat you with dignity? What would you feel? What would any of us feel? Would we not feel grateful? Loved? Cherished? Respected, etc.?

Let me make a quick point here. Being an upstanding, godly person in real life does not mean we have now have some right to demean, denigrate, vilify, or disrespect those we would see as ungodly or wrong. Real righteousness for real life is a move forward to dignifying people even as we disagree with them. Even as we stand strongly against the wrong they have done in our eyes.

So many relationships suffer at home, work, at church, in politics, you name it, because people become so disrespectful and demeaning of the other person when that person truly blows it. I can’t tell you how many marriages, families, friendships, workplaces and churches would improve if people treated each other like Joseph treated Mary.

You want a great work atmosphere? Treat your employees or your co-workers with respect and dignity even when they blow it. Now let me be clear. That doesn’t mean you don’t discipline them, or correct them, or even fire them. But can we as Christians, who are called to live on a higher order than the world, correct, discipline, and even fire someone and leave in our wake, respect and dignity? That’s what a righteous person does under pressure.

Now here is another amazing thing that happens in this story only after Joseph acts in a godly manner. In Matthew 1:20-21 it says, *“But after he had considered this (divorcing Mary), an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins.”*

Notice verse 20 “*after*” he had considered the divorce, (and only then), did God finally speak to Joseph. My goodness, what took God so long?! Why didn’t the Lord intervene sooner? Why did God make Joseph wait till after he had to struggle with all this stuff? Why couldn’t an angel come to him ahead of time and explain everything and remove the tension and anxiety and potential for shame?

One of the reasons I’m so challenged by this section of Joseph’s story is because we see profound godliness in him *before* God intervened.

As I reflected on this, it caused me to think, “Are people able to see godliness in me *before* God intervenes on my behalf in the midst of a pressurized situation? Do they see godliness in me *before* He heals me, *before* He brings relief, *before* He gets me that job, or makes my situation better? Or does pressure squeeze the godliness right out of me?”

Winston Churchill once said: “You can measure a man’s character by the choices he makes *under pressure*.”

This all reminds me of a time when I worked as a janitor while I was in seminary. I worked in an office building that had a large accounting firm. One night during tax season I saw a lone junior accountant pacing his cubicle after everyone else in the firm was gone.

When I asked him what was bothering him he told me that he was struggling about signing some tax returns for a customer. He knew the numbers were wrong but the client was a big one and his boss wanted him to sign those papers anyway. They didn't want to lose the client.

His integrity and his character were under pressure. We talked about it for a while but in the end the man signed the papers and signed away his integrity. It is tough to live righteously under pressure isn't it? We all want to live righteously, but are we willing to pay the price that may come with it?

Many years ago in New Jersey, when I was a youth pastor making very little money, I had to augment my income by working at Newark airport for a car rental agency. Our job was to go out and retrieve cars that were left in other places by customers and bring them back to Newark. We were paid according to the length of the journey. So if it was 10 miles to pick up a car, we would be paid so much. If it was 20 miles, it was more, etc.

One day I, and my 20 other co-workers, had to retrieve cars down on the Jersey shore. When we go back the men huddle together and decided they would charge \$35 for the trip. In actuality, we should have only been paid \$25. I told the guys I would register a \$25 fee, not the \$35 bucks. That's when these guys got

very angry with me. When I stood my ground one guy got furious and came right up to my face yelling and cussing at me. Spittle was flying forth into my face. But when he was done, I looked him square in the eye and told him, "I'm not lying for you or anyone else."

In the end, I stood my ground and didn't fudge the numbers. Sounds good right? You would think after such a godly stand I got rewarded right? You would think that perhaps God arranged it that I got some sort of raise. Or that maybe I led some of these guys to Christ, right? Wrong!!

In the end, they all decided to never to ride with me again and because of that my income was significantly curtailed. My point is, sometimes righteousness costs. Sometime you experience loss. How do we look when our walk with God and our commitment to Him is under pressure?

What an unbelievable challenge from Joseph!! All this got me thinking. Why didn't God remove all this anxiety from Joseph? Is it possible that anxiety removal is not God's number one goal for Joseph, or maybe for you and me? Maybe God holds off because it will produce a greater way of righteousness that is forged only when it is pressurized. Like how a diamond is forged by carbon under pressure.

Carbon is one of the most common elements on earth. There is absolutely nothing special about it—*until* you add heat and pressure. When you add 2,700 degrees and 110,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, then even the most ordinary of things becomes one of

the most beautiful. Carbon turns to diamonds.

On the outside, to the rest of the world, Joseph just looks like carbon...very common. In Palestine in the first century, he's a nobody from nowhere with nothing. But inside, where God was at work, he was all diamond because when the pressure was on, he shone with the very character of God Himself.

Is it possible that this maybe going on in *your life* right now? If you're confused or disoriented or uncertain about something and you wondering where is God's intervention for you—maybe it is not there yet because some of the carbon in you needs to be turned into a diamond. Something needs to grow that can only grow under pressure, under the pressure of God's *non-intervention*.

This leads me to one last thing I want to mention about these verses. In this story Joseph really has two dreams. There is his shattered dream and his God-given dream.

On the one hand, when Mary gave him the news, Joseph's grand dream of having this wonderful life in Nazareth with Mary and living with great respect among his peers exploded into million pieces.

But just as his grand dreamed was shattered, God gave him a new dream...a dream that went beyond his wildest dreams (that is, raising the Messiah).

Think about that for a second. Sometimes amidst our shattered dreams God gives us a new dream and it brings something into play we never saw coming. Have you ever experienced that?

One time there was a woman in our old small group who wanted so bad to get pregnant. She and her husband did everything possible and spent a lot of money in the process. But sadly, at the end of the day, she remained infertile.

Not getting pregnant seemed like a huge blow to the hope she put in Christ to have a child. Some of you ladies know exactly the excruciating pain of standing in such a place. I don't mean to insensitive for those who have gone through that. I know it is a very difficult and disheartening thing for many people.

However, something else happened to my friend along this deeply hurtful journey. Her shattered hopes and dreams were morphed into something else—adoption. And not just adoption, but more precisely, giving a new life to an unwanted baby from a poor country.

As my friend's heart was broken her dreams changed just like Joseph's. She went from a broken dream to a changed dream. A dream that ended up bringing hope to a child she never even knew existed before. The new dream of God did not necessarily change the whole world like Joseph's new dream did, but it did end up changing the whole world for that one little baby.

Do you know only broken dreams, or the hope of changed dreams through Jesus Christ? Broken dreams are bitter and we can only see what we didn't get. And we conclude that God is not at work in my life.

But changed dreams find the other blessings we didn't see or expect. And we conclude God is still at work in all kinds of ways, different ways then we expected or planned.

Like Joseph, God's hand was indeed on my friend. But what she didn't know was that His hand was *also* on a little impoverished orphan in a faraway country. And in *His* wisdom and through *her* shattered dreams God brought about a miracle no one saw coming.

Joseph's greatest dreams for his life I'm sure did not include raising the Messiah. He didn't see that coming. But that was *God's dream*, God's plan for Joseph. And to get to *that* dream Joseph's dreams for life had to be reshaped and even shattered.

What is God's dream and plan for you? What is His dream that has a purpose for those *beyond* you? How do all of these stories speak to *you*? Have you known the pain of a shattered dreams because your hopes for the life you expected to live have been crushed, or because your health has turned south, or because a relationship of yours has absolutely broken your heart?

Have you known the pain of compromising your integrity under pressure and still feel the sting of profound regret and find it hard to experience redemption?

Maybe you are at that point where you feel you are like carbon being squeezed by pressures in life that are beyond your ability to ease or overcome. Maybe you feel like you just can't take it anymore.

I'm here to tell you that Christmas came, that Jesus came to earth, for exactly these kinds of things. He came to bring you hope and strength so that you can move forward in life perhaps in a way you never thought possible.

Christmas came not simply to continue *your* purpose for life, but to give you a *new* purpose and a *new* meaning for life.

If you are at that place where you need a new life today with God I want to pray for you. I want to pray for Jesus to give you the life He intended. A life robust with compassion, love, grace, mercy, hope, and dignity— even for the worst of us. Because God loves us where we are at, not where we are supposed to be.

Let me be clear, I'm not one of those preachers that is going to say to you that God wants you to fulfill *your* dreams. For all I know He may want to shatter them. Look at me. I once had the dream to play quarterback in the NFL. That dream got totally shattered.

But maybe God has a life for you, and for others beyond you, that can only be reached through a broken dream, so God could give you a dream beyond your wildest dreams.

So are you open to His new dreams this morning? Are you open to the hope He wants to give you when you feel so hopeless? To the healing He wants to give you when you feel so shattered? Are you open to let go of the life that you cling to that doesn't seem to bring much of anything and receive from Him a life beyond your wildest dreams?

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*Note: Sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*