

“Learning from Joseph”
Matthew 1:18–25
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In an article in this month’s issue of *The Christian Century* Liddy Barlow says that at its best, childbirth is a team sport (p. 27). While the person giving birth has the hardest and most important role, an entire pit crew is needed to assist — a midwife or obstetrician, nurses or assistants, specialists on call in case of emergency, family members cheering over the phone, a faith community praying, someone to deliver pizza or something better when it is over, and a birth partner, someone to offer ice chips, provide advocacy, sneak granola bars, perform back rubs. One person carries the heaviest load, literally, but a whole village is needed!

Even the birth of Jesus works this way. In the biblical stories there are angels and shepherds, an innkeeper who gets a bad rap but actually helps, and Joseph, the fiancé and eventual husband who decides to stay with Mary after all. There are no medical specialists that we know of, and we are not told exactly where Joseph is when Jesus is born, he probably doesn’t cut the cord... but he supports Mary not only in getting this baby into the world but in raising him, even including him in his lineage. Joseph is not the lead character in this story. Jesus is, and after Jesus, Mary is a close second. But Joseph plays his role, he is part of the village that helps, and there are things we can learn from him.

One thing we can learn from Joseph is that life can be inconvenient, incredibly inconvenient, though there may be blessings involved in what we experience as disruption. What we celebrate at Christmas is most definitely not what Joseph had in mind for his life. It’s not just that he didn’t plan on his fiancé, Mary, telling him she was pregnant before they had been together, though he certainly did not; it’s that he didn’t plan on any part of this business of raising a special child many would come to call Messiah! He envisioned the normal life of a first-century carpenter, full of routine joys and challenges.

But, as they say, life is what happens while we are planning, or perhaps it's not just life that happens but God who intervenes with a different plan. In this case, the latter reality is in play. The angel of the Lord who appears to Joseph in a dream tells him the child Mary carries has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. This change in plans for Mary and Joe is God's idea. Neither of them has chosen this. No one has asked them if they are onboard, if this is a convenient time to raise any child, much less the Messiah. But convenient or not, it is what is going to happen, and eventually Joseph embraces the change of course.

How do we respond to inconvenience? I don't much like it, though I have come to live with it, given my work. I like order and routine, and I tend to make plans about almost everything. I get more work done that way, and having accomplished certain tasks that have to be accomplished, I am more present with people afterward. But there are things we just can't plan for, important things.

The founding pastor of the church I served in Winston-Salem, Jack Noffsinger, said a dear friend in that church who was dying said to him during a visit, "Jack, I hope I don't die on a Thursday?" "Why is that?" Jack asked. "Well," said the man, "Isn't it your day off? I don't want you to work on your day off." Jack assured him it would be okay, there are things we don't get to choose, anyone in ministry understands this.

But it is helpful to remember that inconvenient things are just that, inconvenient, not tragic. In his book *Uh-Oh* Robert Fulghum includes a story about his work at a camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of northern California in the summer of 1959 (pp. 143–146). He combined time as the night desk clerk with helping out with the horses. For a young man just out of college it was interesting work, but he got irritated when the staff was served the same lunch every day for a week — two wieners, a mound of sauerkraut, and stale rolls — and to make matters worse, the cost was deducted from their checks!

So, he complained to everyone, including his co-workers, complained a lot until one man took exception to his whining — Sigmund Wollman, the night auditor whom Fulghum says looked like a bloodhound in a suit and tie. He was a survivor of Auschwitz, a German Jew. One day when Fulghum was complaining, Wollman asked him if he was done. He said he was. So,

Wollman said, “Lissen, Fulchum, lissen me. You know what’s wrong with you? It’s not the wieners and kraut and it’s not the boss and it’s not the chef and it’s not the job.”

“So, what’s wrong with me?” Fulghum asked to which Wollman replied, “You think you know everything, but you don’t know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire — you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life *is* inconvenient... Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much.”

It is a distinction worth noting, even when we are irritated by an inconvenience, and like Joseph, we may discover some blessing in the inconvenience. If it is of Divine origin, we probably will. Whatever God has in mind is surely better than what we had planned.

We learn from Joseph’s experience that life can be inconvenient. We also learn that sometimes we are forced to alter our sense of right and wrong. Matthew says Joseph is a righteous man. He knows what is right and wrong from the perspective of Jewish faith and common practice, and Mary is in the wrong. She is going to have a child out of wedlock and thus he must dismiss her.

He would be within his rights to do so publicly, but because he is a kind man, he decides to dismiss her quietly. The term is “divorce” because they are engaged, a legally binding arrangement, not just a verbal promise, but Joseph does not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. His righteousness goes deeper than the letter of the law.

So, Joseph knows what he needs to do, he doesn’t feel good about it, but right is right and wrong is wrong... until an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, providing an unexpected explanation for Mary’s pregnancy — it is the work of the Holy Spirit — and calling Joseph to do something different — take Mary as his wife and help raise the child. Quite amazingly, Joseph listens and does what the angel says!

We may wonder who wouldn’t listen to an angel, but the truth is many people wouldn’t, indeed, many people don’t listen to God’s counsel, no matter how directly it comes. Many people have very rigid standards of right and

wrong and they are utterly convinced that faithfulness depends on never budging on any matter they have decided is closed for debate — who should have children and when, who should marry whom, who should even spend time with whom, and the list goes on and on. Joseph has a strong sense of right and wrong, but he is not so rigid as to ignore any new perspective, even if it comes from God.

The message for us is that flexibility and an openness to new understanding are assets in the realm of faith. The reason is that our knowledge is always limited. God's basic character does not change, but our understanding of God does. What is righteous and true, loving and just, does not waiver, but our appreciation for all this is inevitably flawed somewhere. If we knew where, we would change our minds... When we learn where, we are compelled to do so.

Consider the church's longstanding posture toward divorce and interracial marriage, and how we address these issues today. Long before LGBT debates, there were fierce debates about these issues which we have come to see very differently. Being open to new understanding isn't compromising faith. Quite often it is a way of deepening it.

But the angel's message to Joseph doesn't just alter his sense of right and wrong, it changes his calling in a way he would never have expected. Rather than simply being a faithful husband, good father, and hardworking member of the community, he will be father to a Messiah. This is what Joseph is called to do without any details about how it is going to work, and knowing nothing more, he accepts the calling.

How do we accept such a calling not simply to adjust our thinking but to point our lives in a different direction? I think of a friend in another church I served who went to seminary later in life. She postponed her calling to raise two sons, but when they got to a certain age, she began her studies. It all went well until she realized that BTSR required a mission immersion experience. She would go to Zimbabwe with a group from the seminary... but she couldn't go, she said, she couldn't leave her husband and children. Her situation was different.

She took her complaint to every appropriate person but was told by each that she would have to go. So, kicking and screaming, she went, and in the

end, the trip transformed her life. She fell in love with the people of Zimbabwe, went back many times, and devoted her life to organizing partnership mission work in Zimbabwe.

Sometimes God calls us to a path we would never have chosen, as God called Joseph and this friend of mine. It is often jarring, and we may only be pointed to a doorway, uncertain of what lies through it, but if it is God who is calling, we are wise to go.

One other thing we can learn from Joseph is that strength can be expressed in different ways. We think of getting our way or shaping our path. Men in particular feel a need to call the shots, be in charge, be the center of attention. But Joseph's experience flips all this on its head. God is in charge, not him. Mary is the lead character, after Jesus. Joseph is decisive, but he changes his mind in light of new information.

Some may think he is weak and passive. On the contrary, he is strong enough to realize he doesn't have to get his way all the time or be the center of attention. He is wise enough to realize things bigger than his ego are at stake. He is righteous enough to do what God calls him to do even if it is unexpected.

So, what are the implications for us? There are many in this time of small egos, petty power plays, and toxic views of masculinity. What might our world be like if more leaders realized that leadership is as much about listening as getting one's way, involving others as being the center of attention? What might families be like if more men realized that healthy masculinity is more about kindness and compassion than bullying and control? What might the church be like if more people were like Joseph in giving up self-interest and accepting the inconvenience of listening to God's calling to help give birth to hope?

In Luke's version of the Christmas story, which we will consider Christmas Eve, Mary takes center stage, and rightly so. In Matthew's version, we learn more about Joseph, and Mary is almost offstage. The latter doesn't seem right, but it is helpful to see Joseph and consider his role because it is a great deal like ours and there is much we can learn from him.