

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Advent 4 – Matthew 1:18-25

Fearless God who came in a dream to Joseph dream through us anew today. Speak into our places of fear, transcend and transform all that keeps us from living your dream.

Amen.

We have this great wooden crash at our house and a few years back we lost baby Jesus. We could not find baby Jesus anywhere. We looked high and low. We had the whole family on it. We were convinced we throw in baby Jesus out, which was really upsetting. But we were hopeful and after a while, eventually baby Jesus turned up. And I don't even want you guys to know the different things we used as baby Jesus till we got baby Jesus back. But baby Jesus is back. It's okay. But then we lost Joseph. But with Joseph we kind of said, well that's all right. Just take one of the magi people, the King, just put him over there. It'll be good. All good. No worries. Good to roll. Somehow it didn't seem that big a deal and there you have it. Today is all about Joseph. And I realized in writing this sermon that we probably need to get on it. And find that baby G find that Joseph immediately we need him back.

So

in 2003 Richard Curtis read the movie and directed love actually and it's the story about eight couples in their varied love stories. You have new love and the unrequited love and the awkward love and the painful love and the painfully awkward love and humorous love, tempted love over the top crazy town love and even young first love.

So one couple, Harry and Karen, they'd been married for years. They have two elementary age kids. The busy work lives, they have a comfortable marriage. Here, He has a new colleague at work named Mia and she's started showing more interest in Harry lingering in his office asking him more and more personal questions. Harry on the one hand seems really uncomfortable and not at all sure that what is happening is what is really happening. He's been married for so long and his skills are a little rusty on detecting suggestive cues. Yeah. But on the other hand, he's intrigued, flattered by the attention from this young, beautiful woman. So one day Mia comes into his office and she suggest a hearing that it's the holiday season and why not go and buy her a gift. It's the right thing to do. Harry's like, okay, so off he goes and he buys this beautiful gold necklace and there's a hilarious wrapping scene moment that goes on and on.

It's super painful. But finally he has this rep gift and he puts it in his pocket for safekeeping and later at home while hanging up her coat next to Harry's, Karen finds the necklace. She smiles and quickly puts it back so as not to give away that she's found her gift a little early, but later as Karen unwraps her gift, she's confused when she opens the box to find, not a gold necklace, but a Joni Mitchell CD. Did you watch as a realization comes crashing in on her? Harry didn't buy the necklace for her. He bought the necklace for someone else. There was a someone else.

Okay.

In fairness, we never know for sure if Harry crosses that line. I think one of the worst things he did was buying Joni Mitchell for Christmas. But I won't go there. We fast forward in the story and Karen does confront Harry confessing that she had found the necklace and she looks him dead on in that awkward moment and she says, would you stay knowing life would always be a little bit worse or would you cut and run? Harry looks stricken. He starts to mumble. Oh God, I am so in the wrong, a classic fool classic fool. And she says, Oh yes, but you have also made a fool out of me. You have made the life I lead foolish to you've broken us, you've betrayed us, and I look silly. There it is. There it is in its purest aching truth. When we weave our lives together with another human being, our behaviors, our words, our actions, they have the capacity to cut the deepest wounds and equally painful is the potential for our actions to cause our loved one to be publicly humiliated, to be made, to feel foolish for believing in the strength of the relationship, to protect integrity, not diminish it.

That same power that builds a couple and gives them strength and gives them love to conquer. All those things in life that gives them trust to know each other so fully and to love so deeply. That kind of intimacy is so vulnerable and when it is broken, it is the other side of hurt on another level. So as we shift over to thinking about Matthew's gospel lesson today, we are invited to the telling of the coming of Jesus. It's the story of engagement. He tells us the birth of Jesus with an emphasis on Joseph. Today is Joseph's day. We only get this opportunity to reflect on Joseph every third year in our lectionary cycle. So it merits a closer look. Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married and in biblical times this meant that money was paid by the groom's family, to the bride's family, and the groom himself paid money to the bride as a sort of insurance in case of death. And all of this was drawn up into a contract, a covenant. And it was about the responsibilities in the relationship, the expectations that were to be held between these two individuals. And there they said that they had a commitment of fidelity to one another. It was binding in all respects. And during the engagement, a couple would not live together. They still had their separate homes, but they did sign on the dotted line. They were bound to each other for ever.

So Mary and Joseph had indeed signed the covenant and they were in that waiting time between the engagement and the wedding when they were living in separate homes and going about their lives. And then Joseph got word Mary was with child from the Holy spirit. Can you imagine what went through his mind? This was his bride. The woman he loved. This was his person and she was with child from who the Holy spirit really did she think he was completely ignorant of how these things worked? Maybe she changed her mind. How can he marry someone pregnant with another man's child like Karen? And that moment when she opened that CD and felt such a fool, even though we know Mary is innocent, Joseph must have felt such a fool. What has he done? How has this happened? He must've been so hurt, so angry and humiliated. I mean, it wouldn't be long before everyone was gonna know. And then the real questions would come. Mary, even in her innocence had made the life Joseph led feel foolish. So what is Joseph to do as he holds this news? He loves her, he loves her. And the truth is she's in danger and engaged woman with a child

who is impregnated with a child that is not that of the grooms. It's considered adultery. And in those days, adultery was a crime that was punishable by stoning and death.

But you know, Joseph said, okay, he's righteous man. He is a righteous man, righteous translating to just, he's a man of justice and he was law abiding by nature. He's the rule guy. He keeps the rules. So the rule would have been to turn her in, to walk away, to wash his hands and to say, it's not mine. I'm innocent. But he decided he did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. He was going to dismiss her quietly

so that she would be okay. He would let people talk about him, make the wondering about his integrity in the midst of his own hurt. And let's face it, a whole lot of doubt. He still had compassion for Mary and for the situation. Joseph was willing to live with the rumors and speculations from the community to toss out that rule book and to keep Mary from disgrace. That is mercy.

okay. But in a dream that night, he was met by an angel. As we translate a messenger, bringing a message sent to confirm Mary's truth, it was the Holy spirit as she had explained, and Mary had absolutely been faithful in their engagement. And the angel went on to tell Joseph, marry her, marry her, and she is going to have a son and you need to name him Jesus. Jesus. God is salvation. Jesus for this child is being sent to save his people from their sins. And so Jesus, so Joseph, who by the way, remember he's a rural person. He likes the rules. He woke up, he had been commissioned and so he did exactly what was commanded of him. And he took Mary to be his wife for going all marital relationship until the baby was born for clarity.

And then when

the baby was born, he named him Jesus. We don't really know how Joseph felt about his beloved carrying another child, even the Christ child. But what we do know is that he had willingness to stand by Mary as partner and protector, and this made him central to the salvation story of God breaking forth into the world. If Joseph says, if Joseph had been unyielding and his righteousness, Mary might not have lived to be the vessel that she was in this story that she is Joseph in his actions was the embodiment of hope and of love. Madeline L'Engle wrote a beautiful poem, and it's written as Mary talking about her Joseph, and it captures that image of love so beautifully. It starts, it was from Joseph first. I learned of love like me. He was dismayed how easily he could have turned me from his house, but unafraid, he put me not away from him. Oh God sent angel. Pray for him thus through his love was love, obeyed in Joseph's love of Mary and Joseph's adoration and abiding love in Mary. Mary was taught to understand what it meant to be loved and they shared that being pushed to trust. They held that together, but she needed him to understand love and God needed her

where others would push away. Joseph pulled in when we have in this text, Emmanuel, God with us. This is the story of the incarnation. When Jesus comes into the world, God could absolutely have done it by himself.

Could've

God chose not to. God wants us as co-creators in this work of love, an incarnation in the world. Joseph was so important to this story. Joseph mattered. We hold up Mary. Yes, Mary agreed and said yes and carried and brought forth into this world, but Joseph was what she needed to do that work. The end of that point is this line, man's love. It was that made me able to bear God's love, wild, formidable to bear God's will through me performed man's love. It was that made me able to bear God's love. Thank you for Joseph. We need him. This isn't complete without him.

And what we know

in these stories that hold humanity partnered in creation with God is that each of us in our own respective lives are God bearers, being called to be the light in the world, to be hope and to be love to one another. That is where good news breaks forth. Each of us in our own life have varying things that

we are called and pulled towards. I opened with that prayer about our dreams that were in our hearts. Do we allow ourselves to meet God and our dream in this advent season as we ramp towards that light and that bringing forth of God's love, may each of us in our hearts dream of the good news that God is calling each of us to in partnership, in collaboration so that we may love and so that we may show others the love that is an of this world.

And I

ask that you would be sent forth with this news empowered

and claiming and collaborating

and knowing that as Joseph stepped back and had a smaller place, that it still mattered. Whatever our place is, small or large, it matters.

Amen.