

This coming Friday we will once again celebrate Christmas Eve with an early service featuring the Sunday School Christmas pageant, that is, if we can find someone to play Joseph. This is not as easy as you might think.

One recent year our Sunday School teachers were astonished unto despair that among the many earnest, religious, biblically astute boys in our congregation, not one could be found who would be willing to embrace the obviously high honor of portraying the beloved carpenter that Saint Matthew presents as a prototype of righteousness and faith. Recruitment efforts were stepped up and met with increasing horror; nobody would touch this role with a ten foot crook.

Finally, the truth came out.

There was a nasty and terrifying rumor going around the Sunday School that whoever played Joseph...brace yourselves now, this is pretty disgusting...whoever played Joseph would have to kiss Mary.

On the lips.

That is so gross.

I am happy and relieved to assure you that this rumor is not true.

We of course would never expose our children to anything so unspeakable.

Yet perhaps our young fellows were onto something whether they realized it or not.

Being Joseph is not an honor but a horror, a role to run away from if you can.

Joseph is told to do something even more terrible than kissing Mary--he is told in a dream that is really a nightmare to stand by her.

Joseph's story is so familiar, and so succinctly told, that it is easy for us to hurry past the terror in his predicament.

Because of his righteous adherence to God's law, he has not yet slept with his fiancée, yet she turns up pregnant.

God's law permits him a public inquiry.

God's law does not permit him to remain with her.

She has committed adultery, and if he stays with her, if he stands by her side through this scandal, then not only is he a laughingstock, he himself is worse than an adulterer--he is an idolater.

If he stays with Mary, Joseph violates the first and most important commandment--he publicly and shamefully demonstrates that he loves a loose teenage girl more than he loves God.

He essentially chooses a cheater over the one and only and righteous Lord of all.

His deep faith gives him no recourse.

He must break off the engagement; he must divorce her, and that will expose her to disgrace and a reputation that will cripple her future.

He is in a heartbreaking, no-win situation that is not his fault.

He is living a nightmare, and spending plenty of sleepless nights searching for some kind of solution.

Finally, *being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly.*

With love in his heart and the law in his soul, he did the very best he could.
And it wasn't good enough.

Just when he had resolved to do this, Joseph finally got some sleep.

It was the kind of sleep that comes only after peaceful resolve and exhaustion, sleep deep enough to dream so vividly you remember it when you wake.

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...

This story is hard for us to access, not only because it is so familiar, but because it sounds so strange, so unique, so distant from our daily experience.

The word of the Lord coming so clearly in a dream is almost as rare as is a man with Joseph's integrity.

What we can understand, though, is scandal, confusion, terror.

We can feel the edge of hopelessness that cuts us open in impossible situations and compromised decisions.

We have sleepless nights over unsolvable entanglements which are certainly not our fault but are still our problem.

We have hearts broken by love betrayed, by faithfulness spurned, by dearly held plans ruined.

We have hopes dashed by unforeseen circumstances and unwelcome news.

We know the bitter taste of disappointment and disillusionment from the mistakes of others that sabotage our carefully constructed plans.

We know what it is to work hard to follow the script only to have things messed up by the uncontrollable chaos of real life and false rumors and other people's behavior.

We have been that Sunday School teacher with the weight of Christmas pageant expectations hanging precariously overhead who comes to mid-December and still cannot find anyone willing to play Joseph.

How can you have a Christmas pageant with no Joseph?

How can you have a marriage with no trust?

How can you sleep in heavenly peace when you have no earthly idea what to do?

We do our best, of course, and our best is not good enough.

Even when we follow the script perfectly, even when we do find the wise ideal balance between obedience and mercy, between justice and compassion, between truth and love, between the rock and the hard place, God interrupts our peaceful sleep with a dangerous dream.

Embrace the scandal.

Accept the unacceptable woman.

Welcome the child.

He will save people from their sins...and he will do it on a cross.

The one who is obviously the product of sin is actually the way God is going to overcome it.

God is in the midst of the problem.

God is with us.

God is hidden somewhere inside the stress, inside the broken bread, inside the faulty family and the flawed community, inside the tangled thicket of headaches and heartaches and horrors we know as our life, and while it is probably not the solution we're looking for, God is up to something unfathomably good there.

God is at work somehow in the compromised womb, and in our compromised lives, and if we can trust God deeply enough to sleep, if we can just push past our anxiety and fear and need to get everything right, we can hear the voice of the angel saying *do not be afraid*.

Do not be afraid to follow your heart, to choose love, to take Mary for your wife, to risk the shame and stigma of judgmental and ignorant people, to go beyond just doing the right thing to clearing your plans and prejudices out of the way enough to make space in your life for God to do an impossible thing so much better than anything you can decide or do or imagine on your own.

It takes enormous courage to take on the role of Joseph.

It takes great faith indeed to sleep and to listen deeply, and then to embrace the one you are sure you should dismiss.

It's even scarier than kissing a girl.

And even better too.