

Last week we looked at how the light turned on for Mary as we explored the gospel of Luke. This week we turn to the gospel of Matthew and see the light turn on for Joseph. In Matthew we read that when Joseph heard that Mary was with child that he initially decided to privately break off his engagement with Mary. Then he has a dramatic change of mind, he sees the light, if you will. The gospel writer shares that Joseph had a dream that informed him that Mary’s pregnancy “is from the Holy Spirit.” He is told that she will bear a son who “will save his people from their sin.” Joseph then chooses to stand by Mary in wonderful yet trying circumstances.

Joseph could have easily dismissed Mary and no one would have questioned his integrity but he chose to serve as father for her child and reaffirm their relationship. When a Jewish man named a baby he was publicly announcing that the child was his child and that is what we see Joseph do in verse 25 of chapter one of Matthew’s gospel.

What meaning does all of this have for us? The story of Joseph portrayed in the gospel encourages us to thoughtfully consider, or even reconsider, our course of action when we are facing trying circumstances that are filled with hurtful emotions.

The natural or justifiable choice, which initially looks like the right choice, might deprive us of the best parts of life. Had Joseph left Mary he would miss knowing the special person that she was, as well as the opportunity to nurture a child, who in retrospect was gifted at every stage of his life.

We are invited by Matthew to embrace a Joseph-like attitude, difficult as it may be, to see how grace can eventually bring about goodness.

Yet the trying circumstance that caused the emotional wound for Joseph in our gospel text was not part of a pattern but seemingly was an aberration. Aberration or not, it still cuts deep and retaliation is a natural response. This is where Joseph is instructive for us. His first idea was to dump Mary but he was a spiritually disciplined man. Before he acted he took it to God and slept on it.

Can you imagine Joseph as he speaks to God before he goes to bed? “Dear God, help me to understand what it is I am to do. Mary has deeply hurt me with her news of her pregnancy. Once others know about it I will be a laughing stock in the community. But this is so out of character for her. Up to now she has been a dream come true. There must be something happening here that I am not understanding. Help me to understand. I think I know what I need to do but if you have different directions for me, let me know.” That is his prayer to God before he goes to sleep.

Sleep provides Joseph with new discernment and direction. Therefore, upon waking he chooses a response of grace as he embraces and stands by Mary. His choice is not easy because he still does not totally understand all that is happening. It is a response of grace that is betting on a good outcome.

Matthew’s unique remembrance of the birth of Jesus spoke strongly to his original readers. We too are invited by Matthew to embrace a Joseph-like attitude in trying circumstances. To be a disciple of Jesus, is to know that difficult choices, grace-filled responses, one that require swallowing hard, oftentimes lay the foundation for unforeseen goodness coming to pass. That is what happened for Joseph in the birth of Jesus. Standing by Mary was not the easy choice but the right choice. Amen.