

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 19, 2010 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)
Matthew 1:18-25
“Joseph, in the Dark”

Every Nativity scene contains roughly the same figures – usually shepherds, some animals, likely some wise men, the baby Jesus, Mary, his mother, and somewhere in the back row, Joseph. We know very little about Joseph, since he makes only a few cameo appearances in the gospels. Whereas the other Nativity characters are fairly well fleshed out, like rich colors in an oil painting, Joseph remains largely a charcoal sketch on rough paper, a bare outline of a man woven into the Christmas tapestry with all the other figures.

Much of what we do know about Joseph comes from these early chapters in Matthew. We know him to be of the house and lineage of King David. And we learn that he had to deal with several crises in a row: the crisis of Mary’s surprise pregnancy; the ill-timed trip to Bethlehem to register for the census; the hurried birth in a manger; and then the angelic warning to flee from Herod’s wrath, necessitating another long journey, this time to a foreign land.

To his credit, Joseph handled himself well amidst all these crises. Yet we’re never told what was going through his mind. The closest glimpse into Joseph’s psychology comes in the passage we just read, when he has been told the news about Mary’s pregnancy and he is alone, while nighttime is falling, trying to decide what to do. In essence, Joseph had four options. He could tell everyone that Mary’s child was his, that they had consummated their marriage prematurely. But that would be a lie and he knew there are no lasting futures built upon lies. Joseph could run away and abandon Mary, but that would be a coward’s path ahead. Joseph could denounce her publicly and let the authorities deal with her violation of the law, but that route led to violence against this young girl. Or he could divorce her quietly, which involved calling two witnesses, handing Mary a written document releasing her from their marriage promise, and likely paying some sort of fine or returning the gifts given in anticipation of their full union.

Those were the range of options he mulled over that fateful night. Remember it appears that Joseph had become aware of the pregnancy before he had learned of the divine cause of the pregnancy. Mary was pregnant and not by him. The law was clear that something had to be done. And so this man of faith, and I would add, a man of mercy and compassion, was faced with making a very hard decision, doing so as darkness covered the land and filled his room. Whatever light he had, both literally and figuratively, must have seemed ill-suited for the dark situation in which he found himself.

I’m going to interrupt this discussion about Joseph in the dark to offer a sidebar, which will be important later in this sermon. The situation with Mary that Joseph is dealing with is something we commonly refer to as “the virgin birth,” but that is an inaccurate title. Joseph’s story is not about a virgin birth or a miraculous birth; he is dealing with a

miraculous conception. Mary is a young girl who miraculously conceived a child, through the power and providence and mystery of God's Holy Spirit, as we'll be told later. There is nothing in scripture to suggest that the birth of Jesus itself was miraculous in anyway, nor is there anything in scripture that asserts Mary remained a virgin after giving birth to Jesus. Our language of "virgin birth" is unfortunate because it falsely changes Mary status prior to giving birth into a lifelong title and state of being. That's not the focus of God's intervention here. The miracle is in the conception, the breaking into the darkness of the womb to create life.

We are told that while Joseph was struggling with what to do, he decided to quietly divorce Mary. This would still be hard on Mary. She would likely never marry now, and would always face ostracism for bearing a child out of wedlock. Yet the law was the law and this seemed all that Joseph could do under the circumstances. In the darkness, Joseph weighed out his options, tried to balance righteousness and mercy, and had come up with this solution; though I'm sure it still troubled him greatly.

Darkness is a powerful metaphor. It can surround us and distort even when it doesn't fully swallow up the things we normally see in the light of day. Novelist E.M. Forster said, "We move between two darkneses. The two entities who might enlighten us, the baby and the corpse, cannot do so."¹ The challenge for us is twofold. We all make decisions and at times feel like we're doing the best we can in choosing from limited options. We make decisions relatively in the dark, unsure what their consequences will be, but simply hoping for the best. Those are Joseph "twilight" decisions.

But darkness cannot simply be a negative metaphor. It cannot only be a symbol of crisis, of feeling helpless as we grope around for a solution. Remember the words from Psalm 139: *If I say "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.* Creation itself involved a movement out of darkness into light, for from out of darkness and chaos emerged life itself. The poet Tennyson said these words: "And out of darkness came the hands/ that reach thro' nature, molding man."

If there is anyone who knows about creativity springing forth from darkness, it is old-time photographers who used to spend hours in darkrooms developing shots. Darkrooms are places dimly lit by red, 15-watt bulbs, in which tanks hold water and various chemicals. Something as ominous sounding as the "Massive Development Chart" is the standard guide for how long you should submerge negatives in the developing chemicals, gently shaking and agitating the solution until the timer tells you to pull it out, rinse it off, and hang the film up to dry. If done right, images will emerge out of the black nothingness of the negative. One of the most famous photographers of the 20th centuries was Yousuf Karsh, known for his portraits of the rich and famous. Karsh said that "character, like a photograph, develops in darkness." That was certainly true for Joseph.

Now let's begin to pull together all these sermonic threads. As night fell, Joseph was forced to make a decision about Mary, a "twilight" decision arrived at in the dark, based on what he knew and what he believed to be his options. As uncomfortable as he felt with his choice, he likely told himself over and over again, "It is all I can do. There's no other way." Yet with God, there is always another way. (Do you believe that?) With God, darkness is never just darkness; it is also the place out of which creation emerges and life is conceived. It is as light to God, who is as present in the dark as in the light.

We're told that God broke into Joseph's darkness – in a dream, through an angelic messenger. God broke into Joseph's twilight with a new dawn – a message that the child in Mary is from the Holy Spirit; so he can take the young girl as his wife. God broke into the twilight with a new dawn that began with the miraculous conception and continued on with the instruction to name the child Yeshua, which in Hebrew means "Yahweh Saves." And best of all, God broke into that twilight with a lasting dawn, saying, This son shall be called Emmanuel, which is both a name and a promise, for it means "God is with us."

Joseph had to decide what to do: Live with a twilight perspective shaped by darkness or act upon a dawn perspective grounded upon God's promise and life-giving light. Joseph awoke and acted by faith upon what he'd been told, not lingering in darkness but moving toward the dawn's light. He took Mary as his wife and in time he named the child Jesus, Savior.

Joseph may not be the most detailed character in the bible, but we can each see ourselves in his story. As individuals, as employees or employers, as communities and nations, we see ourselves in Joseph's story. News comes to us; decisions have to be made. We say, "I'll sleep on it," but sometimes sleep doesn't come easily. In the twilight come half-decisions and rationalizations based on partial answers. We tell ourselves, "This is the best I can do. I'm not strong enough to fight my addiction. I'm not able to admit my lies and share the truth. I feel helpless. I'm too tired to do what's right. This is the best out of a series of bad options. I can live with this." As the darkness falls across our land, lots of Joseph "twilight" decisions are made every day. The headlines talk about tax breaks for millionaires and we sadly shrug as the wealth divide gets greater in this country and political blackmail is used in Congress to protect the "haves" at the expense of the vast majority of "have little" and "have nots." The light fades on another year and we still wonder why 70% of the homicides in Pittsburgh happen to the African-American population; but in the dim evening light, we don't think anything can really change that. We worry about unemployment, about paying the bills, about inequality in educational opportunities, and about our nation's decline by several global standards. We try to sleep on it, but the issues are still there when we awake in the morning.

Joseph's story is a part of all these things, all these issues and personal decisions. Yet Joseph was never alone, just as we are never alone. There is always something more than darkness at work in the dark. Something creative. Something we hadn't thought possible. Something light-emitting and life-giving. Do you believe this? Can you dream of this? Can you even articulate it? Better yet, can you act on it? Joseph did. Joseph

awoke and did as God instructed. And a son was born. And he was and is “Emmanuel,” God is with us. Hold on that good news tonight in the twilight darkness and in the dawn light. As we know this to be true, we can never, truly be in the dark ever again. Thanks be to God.

¹ Quoted by Annie Dillard, For the Time Being, p. 39.