

The Hopeful Plan of God

Matthew 1:18-25

As I stated last week, our sermon series during Advent is on “hope” – and hope seen and experienced by different people as they look and proclaim and *hope* for the birth of Christ. And this week, if you can’t tell already, we’re looking at hope through Joseph – the adopted father of Jesus.

Every time I come across our text today I always take a second and almost sigh. There are a few people throughout scripture that have such a major role and such a small part in not only scripture but our history as children of God. There are but a few people that have so much riding on either something they say or something they do...and yet we know so little about them. Joseph is one of them. If this was the film industry we’d call them “cameo” appearances. But even there what makes a cameo appearance so spectacular is that they are by someone who is already famous or well-known – they just happen to have a very small role in a film. But here, in our text today with Joseph...he’s not even famous! And to be honest he never is – and yet he so vital to this story!

We know so little about Joseph. We know he’s *not* the biological son of Jesus and yet he we assume he takes Jesus in and treats him like his own son. He names him “Jesus” but really that name was already put to him. We know that many consider him and have given him “saint” status (there is a St Joseph)...we know that his lineage traces back to King David and that he was married to Mary, Jesus’ mother, and we have an account of Joseph and his wife dedicating and then misplacing their young son at the temple (**Luke 2:22-52**) and we know of Joseph being warned of King Herod of Judea’s violence and seeking out of young boys to kill them – so they flee...and then we have a return home with Joseph mentioned. So that’s maybe a half-dozen.

But we don’t know anything else. His interactions with this young Jesus nor when or even how he dies. That’s it. And yet...what he does in our text today, reveals a man whose heart was pure, whose love for God and Mary were genuine, and whose hope was in the plans of God.

So let’s read our text today (**Matthew 1:18-25**)

Last week we kind of defined what one version of hope was – in that it was a feeling of expectation for something specific to happen. Well – I think it’s safe to say that none of this that comes upon Joseph was what he had hoped for. But really that comes to fruition when we begin to understand tradition and culture – because it’s there that we then find the challenge that faced Joseph.

Marriages and the contracts and negotiations that happened were a complex process. They were drawn out with many different layers and customs and traditions. But once they were agreed upon, once all the customs and ceremonies were carried out the couple were considered officially married – even though there were still hoops to get through. For us, we’d say you aren’t married until you hear those words from the minister or sign that paper – but then, and even in many cultures still today – that isn’t necessarily so. So when we read that Mary was “pledged” to be married...that’s as good as done. Even though they weren’t living together or consummated the marriage...you were considered married. Even though there was this length of time of a year that had to be seen through first, even though you hadn’t moved in together – it simply didn’t matter. That was custom, tradition, and in all honesty it’s also what was expected. So we need to understand that “pledged to be married” – that’s a done-deal. So now, the difficulty of this text is that’s all we’re given – so we infer the rest. We come to some conclusions on how Joseph *might* or *most likely* had been feeling.

I think it’s safe to say that once that pledge happened – Joseph and everyone else – was happy. Joyous. Elated. Hopeful. This young woman was his bride. There is a joy and hope here of the family to come. It was the hope of a man that involved a wife and kids. It was a hope that was based off of a desire...and “plan” of what this life was going to look like – the future that stood before him with a wife and hopeful kids later on. And in the greater scheme of things this was the plan of not only Joseph, but probably his whole family as well as Mary’s! This was the way of custom, tradition, honor, and understanding. The plan for those times were to marry, have kids, provide, teach and educate in the love and fear of God.

I think that there is where we often times get stuck. We have a plan in mind on what this or that will look like. We have a plan in mind with steps and detailed maps – and I’m obviously thinking bigger than marriage here – I’m kind of expanding it to our “plans” in general. But really how often do our hopes as plans actually go the way we’d like? They do sometimes – but not always.

How many marriages end up the way both parties hoped? How many children are born and parents have this hope for what this child will grow to be and do and how they as parents will raise this child...and yet it doesn’t end that way. People are broken – and desires and hopes that we have do not dictate the path of someone else. I’ve helped out with the police department enough with having to give death notifications and doing hospital visits to know that what is “hoped” for in a loved one is frequently not what is given in life.

How many jobs become what you studied for and hoped for and then simply ...aren’t? How often do we make plans and then they simply implode?

I think this is where “hope” begins to become something else. I think these hopes that we build begin to morph from “promise” or “belief” into *need*. OUR need.

Joseph *needed*, initially at least, all of this to go as planned. For the rituals to take place, for the deals to be made, for the days and months to pass, and for all things to “look” like they were on the up and up. Joseph didn’t want a scandal like this. Joseph didn’t want disgrace to be brought upon him – but he also didn’t want it brought upon Mary either...which is why we get his big internal wrestling that he has. He wants to do what’s right upon the law but he wants to do what’s right for her. He wants to do what’s right in the eyes of his family too. Everyone here...had a plan and that plan simply isn’t working out *AS PLANNED*. And that had to be so frustrating because Joseph, as far as we can see, did everything right. MARY, even did everything right. Everyone here did everything right... and still the plan didn’t fall into place – *in their eyes*.

The timing on all of this simply wasn’t ideal or hoped for. You get married THEN you have kids – right? But as so often in times, it’s not a matter of what WE find as ideal or correct in timing. It’s not our timing, but God’s. And honestly, it’s not about the wedding...it’s not about the bride or the groom...or the family that is getting robbed of this joyous occasion – it’s about the Son this birth. It’s about the fulfillment of the prophecy – the hope of what had been longed for that was bigger than Joseph, bigger than Mary, bigger than wedding plans and customs and traditions.

This *hope* was the hope of the world. For Matthew, who writes to Jewish men and women – people who knew the prophecy – there is no greater hope than this. For you and I...there simply is no greater hope than this too. There is no greater fulfillment – and yet...**how often do things get messy with the work God is doing and the work we want God to do?** And what’s really interesting about that is we don’t believe in a God who is “reactive” – right? To be reactive has this connotation that you simply are flying at the cusp and have no clue what is going on. God doesn’t work that way.

We believe in a God who had a plan from the beginning. Now that is really easy to proclaim and say as comfort when we need those comforting thoughts and affirmation but what we must realize is that when our plans don't come to fruition we must still say that God had a plan from the beginning. Before Joseph had a plan there was God's plan. It wasn't like Joseph wanted to marry Mary, and then God says, "*Oh, I think I'll make Mary Jesus' mom!*" From the beginning *that* was God's plan and God's plan comes first. It always has and always will. And that is a good reminder for us too when our plans don't come to fruition, or things don't work out the way we wanted them to.

We're simply not the ones in charge – and we need to understand that...and honestly, that's probably good thing. My "plans" are not very good when left to me. And I think this text draws that out beautifully because we get this "yet" understanding here as well. That Joseph may not get it at the beginning...he will, and does, by the next morning.

If you look at your Bible and see these verses you see that there are 3 movements that happen. We have what WAS the plan (in Joseph's eyes), what REALLY WAS the plan (with God's revealing it to Joseph), and then finally the fulfillment of that plan (which was God's plan and Joseph's response) which THEN BECAME Joseph's plan as well.

Matthew finds fulfillment in reminding his readers of what they knew and now have seen – that is...THE PLAN ALL ALONG. Of the hope that was and the hope that is. Christ is that fulfilled promise. The fulfilled hope and love – the plan that now finds its completion. The fulfillment of life that all have been given. The One that was promised before the world began that gives *us* life today.

That was all part of God's plan. And this is the reality Joseph had to come to – and that's the movement of this text. That in this long night, this long battle where Joseph is afraid to move in any direction, Joseph learns, and is reminded, of just how good God's plans are. Reminded just how deep and long God's plans run, and the fact that our hope is IN *those* plans and not our own.

Paul writes in **Romans 1:2-4** that this is the plan that was prophesied through the prophets and scriptures. We read in **Acts 13:23** that this Jesus would become the Savior...AS PROMISED. All of this declares that God's plan...became hope realized.

The words of the angel to not "be afraid" – should come to our ears as comfort and peace. Because while we read that Joseph shouldn't be afraid to take Mary home as his wife what this really means is "*do not be afraid because God is in control.*" And isn't that really what all of this is about? God taking control of the mess created by us? God taking control and bringing peace, love, joy, hope, and grace into the chaos of the storm and calming it by way of Jesus? **By way of peace, love, joy, hope, and grace?** And while the marriage to be wasn't a "mess" as in something someone else had done, what we actually find is two wonderfully faithful and God-fearing people who hadn't done anything wrong but that God was using them and their dedication TO HIM to usher in a new era.

And even if they were a complete mess of a couple...IT STILL would not have thwarted the work of God. Christ still would have come down because it's not the people, it's not their holiness that ushers him...but God's love and plan for this world.

This is the season of Advent, a season of hope for the birth of our Lord and Savior – and a challenge to understand that the hope we’ve been given has always looked different than the hope we *feel* we need, or the plan we *have* in our head – and the story of Joseph is a great reminder to simply *trust* God. To remember that hope is placed in the plans that God has and not our own. It’s a reminder that just as the angel said this child will save people from their sins. **1 John 2:12** states that our sins are forgiven because of Christ. THAT was God’s plan. THAT is the hope of the world. AND THAT hope and plan trumps ours any day, every day, and every single time. That’s the joy of this season, the hope of Advent, and the proclamation of Christmas. That this child that was coming would subvert all our plans because HIS plan was to save, redeem, and restore by removing our sins from ourselves and taking them upon *himself*.

Joseph thought he understood what he needed in life and had a hope in what that looked like and felt like and experienced – but really the only need was Christ and this is where we find our only *hope* too. That’s it. It’s literally that simple. Hope being placed upon the only true and right and good hope. And not only during this time of Advent but every day, every month – all year long and beyond.

“Do *not* be afraid.” Are those not the words from an angel? Are those not the words consistently given by Christ? Are those not the words we receive each and every day by the Holy Spirit? And are those not the words given to us by God?

Over 70 times in all of scripture to be exact.

So do not be afraid...for the plan of God is the hope of the world...and may *our hope* be that of God.