



“Joseph & Mary’s Predicament”

Matthew 1:18-25

12/31/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

This passage about Joseph and Mary seems strange to us. Despite the changes in matrimonial law in recent years, this first century text has some things that need explaining. Here’s why.

It says that Joseph was engaged to Mary. Then it talks about Joseph considering divorcing her and finally, more accurate translations refer to Mary as his “wife.” But these relationships are accurate in terms of first century Judaism.

In that culture, marriage was considered a sacred obligation. People in that culture were expected to be married and have children. One rabbi went as far as to say that a man who did not marry was like a man who shed blood. These strong *ideals* had to do with ethnic survival and the expansion of the Jewish race.

Not only was there a social obligation to be married but in those days they married young. Thirteen to fifteen years old was the typical age for marriage. If you remained unmarried after twenty, it was considered disgraceful.

We also have to remember that life spans were considerably shorter then. People in their fifties were senior citizens, people in their sixties were lucky to still be alive. The average Jewish person in the first century could expect to be a parent in their early teens, a grandparent in their late 20s or early 30s and perhaps a great-grandparent in their late 40s or early 50s.

For women in first century Judaism,¹ there was no other career but marriage. A Jewish woman could legally be married as early as 12 and a half years old. And many Biblical scholars believe Mary was fourteen years old or less when she gave birth to Jesus.

The first step toward marriage was engagement. Marriages were arranged either by the parents or by professional matchmakers. The decision of marriage was thought to be too serious a thing to be left up to the emotions of young people. I see some heads

¹ But not in the mid 1st century Greco-Roman cultures because of the rising economic and social status of women

nodding. A girl and boy might well be engaged to be married when they were infants. Historians think that the couple did not have the power of refusing to go to the next step, betrothal, until they reached the age of twelve. So it would be common for little grade-school children to be out on the playground and talking about how they were to someday marry so and so over on the swing set.

The second step in this process toward marriage was **betrothal**. This could not take place until the couple had reached the legal age of twelve. Betrothal was as binding as marriage. A betrothed individual who was unfaithful was treated in the same way as an adulterous spouse. A betrothal could only be ended by divorce.

During a betrothal period, the couple was thought of as husband and wife. If the man died, the woman was referred to as a “widow.” So in our passage about Joseph and Mary, we find verse 18 saying that they are “betrothed.” In verse 19, Joseph is called Mary’s “husband” and it is said that he thought about “divorcing” her because of her pregnancy.

To go off on a tangent for a bit, there were three ways formal betrothal would be signified. The first way would be a symbolic sale where the bridegroom would give the bride an article of value. In later times a ring was handed to the woman by the man in front of two witnesses and the man said: “By this ring may she be consecrated (or betrothed) to me.”

“The mentality lurking behind the custom of the man making a purchase is the idea that women, in that ancient culture, were considered as commodities to be purchased. Even though there was much praise and poetry written about the value of a good wife, in first century Judaism, women were clearly treated as property to be purchased and owned. This is the origin of that archaic custom of “the giving away of the bride” that we no longer include in modern weddings.

The father would transfer his ownership of his daughter over to the ownership of her husband. I also suspect that mentality is latently present when only the

bride receives a ring. Be assured that these things do not happen in weddings in our church.

The second way a betrothal could be symbolized was with a written agreement. “How romantic,” you might say, right?.

On paper, the man would write down a certain amount of money that the woman was to receive in the event of his death or divorce. This was called the *Kethubah* contract. This rule was one of the largest restraints on divorce because it caused men to think twice about ending the relationship. The modern equivalency is the premarital agreement or “prenuptial” agreement where a financial contract is signed before the ceremony.

The third way a betrothal was established was by the couple living together but it was considered sinful in the Jewish culture. In our country’s legal system today it is called a common-law marriage.

Whatever method of betrothal used by the couple, if it was the case that the woman had never been married, it was to last for one year. If she was a widow, it was for a month. But once they were betrothed, the couple was considered married. This is crucial to understanding why Joseph was thinking about “divorce” prior to the wedding ceremony.

Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth. They were two teenagers who were very excited about their future together. They were looking forward to their marriage in the months ahead.

The wedding plans were probably driving them crazy. All of their relatives and friends from the village of Nazareth were coming. It would be a time of feasting and celebration as far as their economic means would permit.

At the beginning of the wedding feast, a group would carry Mary on a litter (a chair connected to poles that would rest on the shoulders of the participants). They would begin the procession at her parent’s house and she would be in her wedding clothing and wearing a small crown. The people would sing as they walked along in this parade and this procession of villagers would be organized by the best man.

When these people reached the groom’s house, Joseph’s parents would bless the bride. For the remainder of the evening, the men would play games and dance and the women would do the same, only

over in another section of the house. Things haven’t changed much because at parties, the couple then and now are often separated because of all the relatives to which they had to attend.

The banquet would begin later in the evening. Gifts would be given and finally the couple would leave. On their way out the door, the guests would throw seeds and pomegranates as symbols of fertility.

There was no honeymoon. Instead, the couple remained at home for a week, hosting an open house reception for as long as they could afford to have it. Then they settled down to the routines of life.

In great contrast to all that was expected to come about in their coming wedding ceremony, here was Joseph and Mary in a horribly difficult predicament because Mary was pregnant during their betrothal time. Unfortunately, people in those times and in that culture, were less flexible and more judging than many so-called “religious” people today. When something like an unexpected pregnancy happened, some people were rather unforgiving. During Jesus’ life there was a vicious rumor that Mary had had an affair with a Roman soldier during her engagement to Joseph. That rumor appears in an obscure historical reference.

It is hard to imagine what Joseph would have said to his folks. “Hi mom, dad. I’ve got some good news but you better sit down.

I’m going to get married. She’s a great woman but she has an unusual name. No one we ever heard of has it but her name is short: Mary. Maybe it will catch on someday.

She’s a brunette, very intelligent and she has a wonderful personality. She is very religious. The complicating news is that she is going to have a baby but she hasn’t been involved with another man or me either. The good part about it is that she got pregnant from God and she’s going to be the Messiah’s mother.”

Obviously a difficult circumstance for a first century Jewish couple – or anyone else, for that matter. So before Joseph was told in a dream what was going on, he had decided to initiate the divorce proceedings as quietly as possible. Joseph loved her and he did not want her to be publicly shamed.

Often, when we read these familiar stories, we tend to forget that they were real people. I like how

one person put it: “Everywhere you cut the Bible, it bleeds.” That is to say, on every page of the Bible, there are real people who are not any different than you or me. The striking presence of the supernatural was as unexplainable and ridiculous and as incomprehensible to them as it would be for us. God was doing something unique in the life of these two teenagers.

Joseph was a young fellow who was probably average at carpentry. Just because he was a lead character in the first Christmas, it doesn’t automatically mean he was brilliant and extraordinarily gifted in any way. A look at any of the disciples proves that.

He might have been a very up tight young fellow who was already showing signs of high blood pressure. He probably spent most of his waking moments worrying about whether or not he would be able to make a living in town as a carpenter. The saw, that his father had given him, had worn out and a new one cost a small fortune.

In a similar way, Mary could not possibly express in words her experience. So we see that God worked with people in personal ways, trying to alleviate their fears with messages of comfort. We also see that these two individuals were pious and attentive to the reality of God in their lives.

We know little about Joseph but he seemed to have sensitivity and compassion in his thought to keep the divorce private. Although I think it would have been more romantic for him to say: “Damn the torpedoes, let’s get married anyway and make a go of it. Mary, it’s you and me against the world.”

If you or I would have been Joseph, it would have taken God to personally tell us, in some way, what was really going on in a convincing enough way so we would, at least, go along with it. Despite all that they didn’t understand, at a minimum, they were obedient to God and took one step at a time all along the way

The point is that God was working in their lives, as individuals, in order to come into human history in this special way. Joe and Mary had no idea that in the future there would be little nativity sets of their family in the homes of millions of people. As far as they were concerned, birthing a child in a stable was

the pits and they thought that if they could survive this, they could make it through anything.

If you would have told them that representations of their family would appear on Hallmark cards in the coming centuries, they would have laughed. What they experienced in the coming years probably *was* bewildering. Imagine raising the perfect kid. Imagine watching your perfect child heal and teach hundreds and then thousands. Imagine watching the civil courts and an angry mob torture and kill your child.

So we are reminded by these little intimate descriptions that God was very much involved in their lives as individuals and their lives as they were interrelated to their family and village clans. And that is what Christmas was actually about – God becoming a person in Christ Who comes crashing into the reality of the mundane and largely predictable every day patterns that we would expect.

The remarkable thing is that God is present in your life today, as you are sitting here in the hard pew and as you ride home – every minute of your existence. The circumstances in your life are not as dramatic as those of Mary and Joseph but God is as much with you as God was with them. And it is, or should be, terrifying – if you stop for even a second to contemplate it: God personally being involved in your life. It’s also beautiful and peaceful to realize that God is with you.

So in this Christmas time – perhaps during all the social obligations and while you’re trying to clean up the disaster area in the kitchen – dwell on the reality of God’s presence in your life now. This presence is what makes your life worth living and you don’t have to come to this only when you are in the last few weeks of your life. God’s actual presence in your life is why you are able to go on, not only when times are tough but when you feel the warmth of the sun; when you feel your feet firmly holding you steady as you stand upright; and when you feel the touch of the hand of someone who loves you to the core of your being.

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