

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

MATTHEW 1:18-25

A wealthy European family had decided to have their newborn baby baptized in their enormous mansion. Dozens of guests were invited to this elaborate affair. They all arrived in their finest clothes. After depositing their elegant wraps on a bed in an upstairs bedroom, the guests were entertained lavishly. Soon the time came for the main purpose of the gathering: the baby's baptismal ceremony. But where was the baby? No one seemed to know. The child's governess ran upstairs and returned with a desperate look on her face. Everyone began to search frantically for the baby. Then someone recalled having seen the child asleep upstairs on one of the beds. The baby was on a bed all right – buried beneath the guests' great pile of coats, jackets and furs. Fortunately, the child was fine despite a close call. The object of that day's celebration had been forgotten, neglected and nearly smothered. That's also what can happen each and every Christmas. The baby whose birthday we celebrate on Christmas Day – the Lord Jesus – can be easily hidden, forgotten and neglected beneath all the frantic activity of the season. Christmas has become such an incredibly busy time for most of us that we can forget what it's all about. Every Advent season we need to ask again, "Where's the Baby? Where's Jesus - the reason for the season?"

During this Advent season, we've been asking and answering four questions: four questions that we often ask or get asked at Christmas time, but four questions that are much bigger than Christmas as well. Today, the question is "What are you going to do?" Christmas has become such a busy time of so much doing. It's quite the production for most of us, isn't it? Quite stressful to say the least. Christmas is also a time when many decisions have to be made. Where will we celebrate Christmas Day? With whom will we celebrate this year? What all do we have to do to get ready for the big day? What kinds of gifts will we give and to whom will we give them? The sheer number of all these decisions just adds to the stressfulness and busyness of the Christmas season.

Joseph – the Joseph in the Christmas story – faced such a time of high stress and many decisions when he learned that his fiancée, Mary, was pregnant. He was confronted with a very difficult, stressful situation and he didn't know what to do about it immediately. Joseph had to answer a very personal question, "What am I going to do?" Let's read the story that pertains to him today, because what he did can be instructive for you and me. Here Joseph assumed everything was going smoothly in his engagement to Mary and then everything seemed to turn into this monumental train wreck. Can you imagine his initial confusion and bewilderment? Just considering Joseph and how he dealt with this crisis might offer you help when you face difficult times and you ask yourself, "What am I going to do?" Here's the first principle I learn from Joseph. When you're wondering what to do ...

DECIDE TO ACT COMPASSIONATELY.

Marriage customs in Joseph's day and time were a bit different than they are today in our culture. In first century Palestine, a Jewish man and woman made a formal consent to be married in a ceremony before certain witnesses in the community where they lived. But then the bride and groom returned to their own homes after this ceremony. It was similar to our practice of a formal engagement but it was also much more. A couple was considered legally married at this point in the process even though their relationship had not yet been sexually consummated. After one year, the groom would then come and take his bride to his own home and they would begin living together as husband and wife.

Now Joseph and Mary had already gone through the initial event, so they were legally husband and wife. But it was during this one year period of time before they started living together that the Holy Spirit caused the conception of the baby Jesus to take place in Mary's womb. Mary's pregnancy appeared to an uninformed person to be ample evidence that she had committed adultery. In the Old Testament, the penalty for adultery was clear. "Suppose a man meets a young woman, a virgin who is engaged to be married, and he has sexual intercourse with her. If this happens within a town, you must take both of them to the gates of that town and stone them to death. The woman is guilty because she did not scream for help. The man must die because he violated another man's wife. In this way, you will purge this evil from among you." (Deut 22:23-24 NLT)

Joseph could have made life very tough on Mary. He could have demanded her execution. But Joseph had no desire to see Mary publicly disgraced much less killed by the people of Nazareth. Before the angel appeared to him, he had decided simply to divorce her as quietly as possible. Even that would be difficult, because a couple was required to divorce each other before witnesses as well. Nevertheless, as Joseph wrestled with what to do, he decided that the shame of having her return to her own home was certainly preferable to a public trial and probable execution.

Joseph wondered, "What am I going to do?" He decided to act compassionately despite the fact that he must have been very hurt, wounded and confused beyond words. At this point in time, God had not spoken to Joseph. No angel had come yet to explain Mary's pregnancy. But even though he didn't know the whole story by a long shot, Joseph decided to act compassionately. I see a principle there when we badly need guidance on what to do or how to handle a tough situation. When you're wondering what to do – and it involves someone who has wounded you, wronged you or failed you – the wisest course of action might well be found in deciding to act compassionately towards that person regardless. When people hurt you – like Mary appeared to hurt Joseph – you don't always know all the circumstances involved. But even if they did intend to offend you, it's better to act compassionately.

Compassion is a gift of love. It's easy to separate yourself from folk who you believe have wronged you in some way. It's easy to condemn them or just avoid them. It's harder to put yourself in that person's situation and offer compassion. That's evidently what Joseph did here. Wouldn't you love to know what personal conversations Mary and Joseph must have had about her pregnancy prior to the angel appearing to Joseph? Painful and awkward, I imagine. But if Mary did plead innocence, it's clear that Joseph didn't believe her at that point in time. Nevertheless, Joseph made up his mind to act compassionately towards Mary.

Sometimes you can be reluctant to be compassionate or show mercy because you conclude that it make you look gullible, naïve or that people can take advantage of you easily. Is there value in being compassionate? Bob Goddard writes, "Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant with the weak and wrong. Sometime in life you have been all of these." That's true, isn't it? At the end of the day, don't show compassion because the other person deserves it or because it earns you some kind of personal merit. Act compassionately because God Himself is compassion personified and He calls you to be like Him. How did Jesus put it? "Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." (Lk 6:35-36 NLT) Secondly, when you're wondering what to do ...

DECIDE TO SEEK GUIDANCE.

The Bible doesn't give us any information about Joseph's personal relationship with God or the depth of his spiritual commitment. But he is described as a righteous man in verse 19 which meant that his heart was right with God. His decision to treat Mary compassionately is evidence that he was a godly man. Not only did he act compassionately when he didn't have to do so, but he also chose to listen to the angel who appeared to him in a dream. The Bible suggests that Joseph was a faithful man who sought God's guidance at this critical moment in his life. Because God knew Joseph's heart, He sent an angel to him in a dream. So what do you do when a crisis hits your life, a situation develops that's way beyond your control or circumstances evolve that change your life in radical ways? The right thing to do every time is to seek guidance and direction from God. The Bible says, "If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it." (James 1:5 MSG)

How do you receive guidance from God? God chose to speak to Joseph through a dream. You can hear remarkable stories today of how God continues to use dreams as one way of providing direction. True, it's not very common, but it still does happen. The more obvious ways God gives us direction include the following. First, God gives you direction through impressions received in prayer.

The Bible is full of promises that God will provide guidance when you make a decision a matter of faithful, persistent prayer. For instance, we read, “When they call on me, I will answer; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue and honor them.” (Ps. 91:15 NLT) Second, God gives you direction through the Bible itself. Jesus said, “But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!” (John 15:7 NLT) How do you get Jesus’ words into you? Read God’s Word. Meditate upon it. Memorize it. Study it. Make it a part of your life. Over time – and probably more quickly than you think possible – God’s Word will become increasingly a part of you which allows God to use His own Word to guide you in your decisions.

Third, God gives you direction through the wise counsel of godly people. The Bible says, “Refuse good advice and watch your plans fail; take good counsel and watch them succeed.” (Prv 15:22 MSG) Fourth, God gives you direction through divinely prepared circumstances. Maybe you’ve heard the old saying, “When God opens a door, no one can shut it and when He shuts a door, no one can open it.” It’s based on this verse, “I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can close....” (Rev 3:8 NLT) Many of you remember the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr. back in July of 1999. Experts concluded that vertigo played a major role in the crash of the small airplane he was flying at the time. When a person takes flying lessons, you eventually learn how to fly a plane using just the plane’s control panel instruments rather than your eyes. Why is that important? Because some day you might be flying in a storm and experience vertigo – the loss of your sense of equilibrium. When that happens, your senses can’t be trusted to tell you where you’re going – up, down, straight or sideways. You’ve got to rely on your instruments rather than your senses. There come those times in every life when you experience storms - emotional, relational, situational storms – and you can easily lose any sense of spiritual equilibrium. That’s when you have to trust the instruments God provides: prayer, the Bible, godly advisors and divinely prepared circumstances. When you’re wondering what to do, thirdly ...

DECIDE TO REJECT FEAR.

What was the angel’s very first comment to Joseph? “Joseph, son of David, ... do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife....” (Mt 1:20 NLT) Why say that unless Joseph was, in fact, very much afraid? What might Joseph have been afraid of? He was afraid of losing a very important relationship in his life. He loved Mary and yet – from all outward appearances – she had betrayed him. Perhaps he was afraid, also, of misjudging Mary. I’ve got to believe Mary tried to explain to Joseph that she hadn’t been unfaithful to him. So could Mary be telling the truth? He’d never known Mary to lie, but her explanation was impossible. Joseph could have been afraid of the opinions of his family and friends. Did some of them want Joseph to be harsh with Mary? Perhaps. Did some of them now perceive him as being a weak man who was allowing himself to be taken advantage of? Perhaps.

It was a situation that certainly would have prompted fear in any of us. Life – with all of its decisions about what you should do – opens up all kinds of “what ifs.” Fear can paralyze you and stop you in your tracks. And when fear becomes a lifestyle, it can cost you a whole lot in life. Fear can keep you from being used by God. It can keep you from being your best. It can keep you from showing love. Fear can make you sick physically, stifle creativity, disrupt families and stunt your growth as a person and as a child of God. Fear can dominate your life if you let it. But Joseph decided to reject fear and act in faith. He believed God. He believed the angel was real. He believed God was giving Him direction. He stepped out in faith and took Mary as his wife. By the way, that can be another way God provides direction. God will never give you direction by filling you with fear, but He will always challenge you to act in faith. The Bible says, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” (2 Tim 1:7 NLT) God calls you to reject your fear, step beyond and outside of what you feel anxious about and take a step of faith in His direction. That leads to a final observation about when you’re wondering what to do ...

DECIDE TO OBEY GOD FULLY.

That’s what Joseph decided to do. He rejected some very powerful, real fears and stepped out in faith. He obeyed God. He obeyed God fully. He did take Mary into his home. He did give the name Jesus to the baby. What is faith or trust in God – really? It’s not just a warm, positive feeling about God. It’s more than an intellectual awareness that God exists. At the end of the day, faith is a decision to do what God wants you to do. That’s called obedience. I doubt Joseph understood everything that was happening to Mary or to him even after this amazing dream. No doubt he still had more questions than answers. Nevertheless, he obeyed God fully. If you want God to answer all your questions – all your “what ifs” and “how comes” before you ever do what He wants you to do, you will not obey God very often if ever. There will be many times when you won’t understand what God is up to in your life, but you can still obey Him fully. Do you know what Joseph’s experience teaches me? God doesn’t care if you understand His will, but whether you obey His will. Faith means obeying God even when you don’t understand God or what He’s doing or not doing.

I have a question the Bible doesn’t answer here. I wonder how long it was between the time Mary’s pregnancy was discovered and the angel appeared to Joseph in his dream. A few days? A few months? If I know anything about God, there may well have been a significant period of time between Joseph seeking God’s direction and God actually providing it! It makes me wonder.... Why didn’t God send that angel to Joseph *before* Mary got pregnant? Wouldn’t that have made it easier on Joseph? Sometimes, doesn’t it seem that God keeps us in the dark deliberately? Sometimes, doesn’t it seem God takes His own good old, sweet time giving us answers to life’s dilemmas? Why is that?

I've come to see in my own life that God is all about developing what I call your "faith muscle." Your body's muscles develop to the degree that you use them. Lots of activity results in strong, often large muscles. No activity results in weak, small muscles. Spiritually, faith is like a muscle. If you use it, it grows. If you don't, it shrinks. God deliberately puts you into situations in life that call you to trust in Him, hold fast to Him and develop faith in Him. Don't you think Joseph's "faith muscle" developed in an amazing way during this whole event? God develops faith in you the same way. He puts your faith under stress. He demands that you exercise faith. He forces you to flex it. He allows a load – a burden – to come into your life so you will exercise faith, develop that spiritual muscle and lift that issue to Him. So, how important is this obedience – this faith thing - to God? It's everything to God! The Bible says, "It's impossible to please God apart from faith. And why? Because anyone who wants to approach God must believe both that he exists and that he cares enough to respond to those who seek him." (Heb 11:6 MSG)

Have you seen the movie, "The Karate Kid" – the 1984 original not the 2010 remake? In the original version, teenage Danny Laruso gets tired of being picked on at school by a group of fellow students who know karate and use it to terrorize him as well as others. So he decides he wants to learn karate and he asks a Japanese American by the name of Mr. Miyagi, to teach him. Now Mr. Miyagi had some unconventional training methods. Danny begins his karate lessons by washing and waxing Mr. Miyagi's car. His hand movements have to be very precise, very controlled. "Wax on; wax off." Then Danny paints Mr. Miyagi's fence. Again, his hand movements have to be very precise, very controlled – up and down over and over again. Then Danny has to paint Mr. Miyagi's house. You guessed it – back and forth, back and forth – very precise and very controlled. Finally, Danny loses his patience. He suspects Mr. Miyagi is just using him to get some chores done. Mr. Miyagi's response to this accusation is to throw a punch at Danny which Danny is able to deflect almost automatically. Danny didn't realize it, but those chores coupled with Mr. Miyagi's insistence on precision and control had trained him in the essential hand movements of karate defense. Only then did Mr. Miyagi's training technique make any sense. Mr. Miyagi tells Danny, "Do not question. Obey!"

Life with God can be like that. You want God to make you like His Son, Jesus. You ask Him to develop your character. You desire to have a strong faith. So God allows problems, challenges and obstacles to come into your life. The purpose isn't to make you miserable. The purpose is to develop that all important faith muscle until it's strong and powerful. The training isn't always fun. I'll grant you that. And sometimes God has to say to you – like Mr. Miyagi – "Don't question. Obey!" So what are you going to do – be it at Christmas or any other time of the year – with all the stresses of life? Learn from Joseph. Decide to act compassionately. Decide to seek guidance. Decide to reject fear. And decide to obey God fully.