

The Result of Care

Matthew 1:18-25

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

December 15, 2013

Matthew's version of the birth story is kinda spare, compared to Luke's. Luke is all into the glory of it, you know, choirs of angels, the heavens lit up, etc. He's trying to paint a sort of historical picture, too. When people talk about the Birth of Jesus, they're usually using Luke's story as the basis.

But there's an important emphasis in Matthew that I think escapes most of us. Throughout this story, we see how God cared for his people in a lot of different ways. Through seeing that, we can see how even back then, he cared for us.

First, God cared for Mary. He protected her more than you realize. Put yourself in Joseph's place. Mary appears to be guilty of adultery. Yes, I know, the scripture says that they were engaged, but in their world, being engaged was about as much of a commitment as marriage was. Joseph was bound to be thinking, Here's this woman who you love, to whom you've been engaged for a while, and she's going to have a baby! – but you KNOW it's not yours. Guess what that means? The penalty for adultery is stoning. It wasn't always carried out, but it was done often enough that it was still a real threat. Why didn't it happen this time? God's care. God saw to it that this woman who was carrying his own Son wouldn't face such a fate; he made sure of that in advance by making sure *Joseph* was the one she'd marry. Joseph was never gonna hurt Mary, God knew that. Joseph only wanted the best for her – like God did. And that's important, because what Joseph did in response to all this determined her fate. What most often happened in adultery cases like these was that the accused woman was brought before the assembled elders, proof was offered, and she was allowed to

confess and disown her sin. It was a great public humiliation and disgrace. Her husband or soon-to-be husband would then request a divorce, or breaking off of the engagement. Mary's life would have gotten hard, because they would have sent her away to have the child. A lot of the time, the woman never returned from that banishment.

But what did happen? Matthew tells us that Joseph was "a righteous man," meaning someone who was right in all his relationships. Joseph was especially right in his relationship with Mary. Our Scripture tells us that he had resolved to "dismiss her quietly," which means he wasn't willing to expose her to the humiliation and disgrace that he could have. Obviously, he didn't send her off to be stoned, either. If you think about it, Joseph was leaving *himself* open to trouble. Mary was going to have this baby; and people back then knew how to count days and weeks, as well as we do. Everyone would have figured it out. He would have dismissed her; a few months later, she'd have had the baby; and guess who they'd think was the father? – if in fact he did it quietly, without revealing her alleged "sin." That kind of thing was a reputation-wrecker. But Joseph was willing to endure it, if he had to. He cared that much. Maybe I should put it this way: *God* cared about Mary so much, he married her off to a guy who could do the caring for him.

Now, don't think Joseph wasn't in turmoil about it. Verse 20 hides something in the original language. The NRSV reads, "When he had resolved to do this," and that implies that he had already made up his mind. In fact, he hadn't made up his mind. He was agonizing over it. Most other translations agree with that, and say things like, "as he was thinking of these things," or "as he thought about," etc. Joseph didn't have the

clarity that comes with making a decision. So it seems clear that he was agonizing over the whole situation. And what does God do for him? He comes to him in a dream. He cares for Joseph, so he comes to him to ease his burden. God did more than that; he revealed Joseph's role to him. He revealed to Joseph that this was all of God's doing; and to prove to Joseph how much he cared, God gave him the ultimate honor. He gave Joseph the honor of naming his own Son for his earthly life with us. Joseph's agony was ended, and replaced by a sense of peace. That's what happens when you know what God wants you to do, and you do it. Joseph's going ahead and taking Mary as his wife is the result of God's care.

Where is the baby Jesus in all of this? Don't forget, we're talking about a real baby here, a baby like you and I were at one point in our lives. This baby was destined to suffer, but God made sure it would be when the time was right, a long ways down the road. God cared for this little human by giving him an awesome mother. Mary agrees to do without objection what God asks her to do. That sets her apart from all the figures in the Bible who get asked by God to do something hard. They usually resist. Mary didn't. She loved God that much. And having Joseph as his father was another way God cared for his Son. Finally, we get to the *place* where Jesus grew up. God made sure he'd be away from places like Jerusalem, dangerous as they were, and instead would be in Galilee, a kind of slow, back-water place. Jesus could learn well here, without distraction. His anonymity was his security until he was ready for his public ministry. The result of all of God's care for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, was a savior for all the world.

So – God cared for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. That seems like enough, doesn't it? No, not quite. See, In all of this, God was caring for *us*. This whole thing – being born of Mary, a virgin, becoming human like us, dying on a cross for us – this whole thing is about God's care for you and me. Even way back there in the first century, God had *us* in mind as he played out this drama. We see God's care for us over and over in our lives. Just as Mary needed and received God's protection, so do we get God's protection when we need it. Just as Joseph was reassured when he was in his darkest moments, so does God reassure us when we're in our dark times. Just as God put Jesus into the right situation, assuring his growth into what God wanted him to be, so do we get put into the right situations, so that we can be who God wants us to be.

Sadly, there are so many in the world who don't put themselves in God's hands, to receive his protection, reassurance, and help. There are plenty of those folks all around us. I did a little digging into this. In the Town of Tappahannock, 41 and a half percent of the people belong to or go to a church. In all of Essex county, about 43 percent do the same. That means that in the town of Tappahannock alone, there are between 1400 and 1500 people who either don't know our Lord Jesus or have turned their backs on him. In the county as a whole that number would be about 6500. For those people, Christmas doesn't have much meaning. It's just another holiday you have to celebrate and buy gifts for. They don't have the protection, reassurance, and help that we do. We offer gifts at Christmas because we're grateful for the biggest gift God has given – his son, and therefore eternal life. Shouldn't we want that for everyone?

So, you know what our gift to our Lord Jesus can be this Christmas? It can be us preparing our hearts and minds to take the Good News, about a Savior born for us, to all these people who need it so bad. It can be us praying and reflecting and opening ourselves to new directions God is taking us. It can be, and this is important, you and I putting ourselves in God's hands to serve his purposes.

The result of that care on our part will be people brought to our Lord, and serving and worshipping alongside us. As we contemplate God's ultimate care this Christmas, let's also give thanks, that God has included us in his work of care.