

November 27, 2016

The Faces of Christmas
The Face in the Background
Matthew 1:18-25

Opening words: Today, I begin a new eight-part sermon series, *The Faces of Christmas*. Each week, I will look at a different face in the story of Christmas. Their lives were far from perfect. They faced challenges. The same challenges we face today. In the past 2,000 years, our world has changed a great deal, when it comes to transportation, communication and electronics, but the human condition remains the same. We begin this sermon series by looking at the most famous stepfather in history, Joseph.

We find ourselves this morning in the Gospel of Matthew. It was written approximately the year 50 AD by a one of the original disciples, Matthew. Before meeting Jesus, he was a tax collector. This Gospel was written to the Jewish-Greeks to prove that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. He was their only hope of salvation. Matthew can be divided into five great discourses. Our reading for today come from the first. The Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus. To the Jewish world that information is vital. Jesus was 100% Jewish; his ancestors could be traced back to Abraham himself. Once this is established, Matthew turns to the birth of Jesus. Our scripture reading for today is Matthew 1:18-25. Let me call this message *The Face in the Background*.

Matthew 1:18-25 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us") ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Founder of the Christian Men's Network, Edwin Louis Cole once said, "*God never ends anything on a negative; God always ends on a positive.*" If that quote makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

The first verse in our scripture reading says it clearly. Mary was the mother of Jesus. She is pledged to a man by the name of Joseph, the face in the background. The rules of their society laid out proper conduct. Marriages were arranged by their parents or professional match makers. There was nothing casual about this arrangement. It was taken seriously. For one year, during this betrothal period, they were married in every way but one, the two could not have sex. They kept their hands to themselves for one year. This arrangement could only be broken by legal action. Do you see the problem? Mary is pregnant and Joseph knows he is not the father. He is within his legal right to break the arranged marriage. No one would have blamed him. Unlike our world, their world took morals seriously. Mary would have lived in disgrace. The orthodox members of the faith would have liked to have stoned her. That brutal behavior was within the rules. The problem is, God doesn't always follow the rules. In a dream, God tells Joseph not to worry. The child that Mary is carrying is not the offspring of another man. The child she is carrying is the son of God. Let there be no doubt about it; Jesus was born to a virgin, and Joseph, the face in the background, becomes the most famous stepfather in history. If any of this sounds familiar, say, **"Amen!"** Can I state the obvious?

Joseph did absolutely nothing wrong, yet God put him in an extremely difficult situation. Don't spiritualize Joseph. Just look at the facts. Verse 19 says he was a righteous man. That meant he followed the law of the orthodox faith. He deserved a better life, but his life suddenly got very complex. He is in a no-win situation. There is no right answer. It is like trying to answer the question, "do you still beat your wife?" "Yes" means you beat your wife. "No" means you beat your wife in the past. If he divorces Mary, then she could possibly be stoned. He didn't want Mary to die. He was a good, compassionate man. If the truth be told, she did nothing wrong. If he doesn't divorce Mary, then he is telling his world that he is the father of this baby. No one is going to believe this crazy virgin birth story. His parents aren't going to believe it. His extended family isn't going to believe it. The people in the community aren't going to believe it. No one is going to believe it, but Joseph takes Mary, and her unborn child, as his own. Because of that choice he suffered both personally and socially. Joseph, the face in the background, reminds us of what we see every day. Bad things happen to good people. If you have ever known a good person who suffered something bad, say, **"Amen!"** If that someone is you, say, **"Amen!"**

Several weeks ago, I told you Pat's story. She was the one I tried to help in the Cleveland area. She was a victim of Satanism. She survived some of the worst things this world can offer. She came to me to help her piece her Christian theology together. I will never forget the day she decided to come to church. She came late and sat alone in the back row. She stayed until the children's message. When the kids came up, she went out. She called me several weeks later and asked what happened to those

children. I said, "Nothing. I gave them a piece of candy and told them God loved them." When she heard my answer, she felt foolish. She ended by asking, "*Am I the only one in your church with problems?*" I didn't tell her, but that may have been the most foolish thing she ever said to me. I said with a laugh, "No! Everyone has problems." Can I ask you a question? Have you ever come to church with a problem? Let me answer it for you, "Yes!"

It is almost as if we come to church in costume. On the surface, we look as if our lives are under control. We have enough money to live the good life. Our health is impeccable. Our relationships are solid. I hate to say this on the First Sunday of Advent but we are all liars. There is not a single person here with a perfect life. There is not a single person here today who doesn't have a problem. Sometimes our problems are self-inflicted. For example, we lived beyond our means. We smoke and we know it will damage our health. However, sometimes our problems are not our fault. We have done nothing wrong, but hardship found our front door. Sometimes it just appears. Like Joseph, the face in the background, God asks us to do something we feel unqualified to tackle. We hear those stories every day. That is why people are always trying to answer the question, why do bad things happen to good people? Our is not the first generation to ask it. They asked it in Jesus's time.

Do you remember the story in the ninth chapter of John? A man had been blind from birth. He never saw a sunrise. He never saw his mother's face. He never saw anything. The disciples want to know why this man was suffering. They believed the root of suffering was sin, so they asked Jesus the question: who sinned, this man, or his parents? Jesus tells them, and us, that there is no connection between sin and hardship. However, before the day was over, Jesus healed the man and the power of God was on display for everyone to see. So, if sin is not the answer, then then what is? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Some believe God permits hardship to teach us compassion. There may be some truth there. When I was in seminary, I had a friend who suffered one of life's greatest disappointments. He and his wife lost a baby at childbirth. Their mourning was powerful. Several weeks after their loss, I saw him in the library. We talked for a few minutes about nothing, then he brought it up. He said, "*Russ, people tell me the loss of our baby will make me a better pastor. I will be more compassionate with couples who experience this sadness. If the reason for losing my baby is to be a better pastor, then I don't want to be a better pastor.*" I'm not sure that is one of God's methods. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Some believe God permits suffering to draw us near to God. There may be some truth there. On September 11, 2001, our country was attacked. It was not just an event in

New York City, Washington DC and western Pennsylvania. It affected the entire country. It effected this community. Hours after the attack, we held a prayer service. You may have been here and remember the crowd. Facing an uncertain future, well over one hundred came to draw near to God. It was truly special. If we had a special prayer service tonight, how many people do you think would come? In hardship, we do draw near to God, but that passion is short lived. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Some believe God permits hardships to teach us to appreciate the good times. They tell me, south of the city of Houston is a large community of Vietnamese. The first Vietnamese arrived shortly after the fall of Saigon in 1975. They fled to America for one reason. They wanted to live and live they did. Those original immigrants went to work and taught their children the value of work. They also told their children about the harshness of their homeland and the goodness of America. Today, within that community is true patriotism. Perhaps, those people are right? Bad times do teach us to appreciate the good times. So why is it so many Americans are ungrateful? Why is it so many Americans only see what they want and not what we have? Perhaps, as a country we haven't experienced enough bad times? Maybe God has been too good to us? Many don't even recognize the good times. The question remains. Why do bad things happen to good people? Do you want to hear my answer? This is my answer.

The reason bad things happen to good people is that life is hard. Every day we play the part of Job. Never forget it. We live in Satan's playground. Every day the great adversary does these horrible things to us so we will denounce God. However, we won't do it. We know the truth. This world is not the main event. This world is just the warm-up act. The main event is heaven, where God reigns. The best we we can do today is practice what we will be doing in heaven for eternity. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Two years ago, I received news some painful news. My Colorado sister Janet was diagnosed with stage four cancer of the lung lining. I have worked with too many families. I knew what that meant from the very beginning. Her time was limited. For the past two years, she has tried a wide variety of chemotherapies. She has endured the side effects of each one. Less than six weeks ago, she had a stroke, robbing her of some of her short-term memory. Two weeks ago, I received the call I had been expecting for two years. My sister is terminal and it is only a matter of time. The disease has moved into her lungs. The doctors say she has somewhere between two months and ten months. You know the truth; only God knows.

On Wednesday morning, my Ohio sister Susan and I are flying to Colorado Springs to visit our dying sister. I believe it will be the last time the three of us will be together in

this world. No one questions salvation. We were all raised in the church. We all know Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We all expect to see each other again in heaven. We are not going to be spiritual frauds now. Like Joseph, the face in the background, my sister did nothing wrong. She exercised. She ate all her vegetables. She never consumed tobacco in any form. She is sixty-six years old and is dying of lung cancer. I have never dealt with anxiety, but I am anxious about this trip. I ask you pray for me. Janet is just one more example.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Like Joseph, the face in the background, they did nothing wrong. Life is hard because Satan wants us to denounce our faith, but we won't do it. Someday we are going to heaven, where God reigns. Edwin Louis Cole is right. He once said, "*God never ends anything on a negative; God always ends on a positive.*"