

December 30, 2018 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmas  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Matthew 1:18-21

### Option Three

Christmas was just a few days ago, but one of your presents may already be broken. Something is always breaking: toys, wine glasses, your stock portfolio, the government. Something is always breaking. Sometimes in old buildings—like church buildings—it seems that something is always breaking. A bit ago something broke over at the Gym—we lived with it in a broken state for some time, and then one evening it became clear with the frustration it was causing, on top of other frustrations, it needed to be repaired pronto. It was a relatively little thing, but fixing it could be a big help, hopefully. All it would take was a handyman. Unfortunately, they can be hard to come by. But I was desperate, so even though it was somewhat late, I texted a handyman who's helped us out here in the past, a really nice guy named José. I texted him, clumsily, it's not my best form of communication, "Hi from Erin at the Lutheran church. We have a small repair job, I think you can do it, it won't take you long, but we need it fixed ASAP. Can you help?" That was my message to José, and I knew it was a long shot; he's really busy. So I was so happy to hear right back from him. Almost immediately José texted me back, "I think I can help, tell me more about the project? This is José from CTA." CTA, as in Chicago Taco Authority, the restaurant over on Irving Park Road. Instead of texting José the carpenter I had texted José who'd done some catering for the church. "Ack, sorry," I texted back, "I meant to write to someone else... Merry Christmas!"

I felt a bit stupid—but I was also touched by the response, by the can do spirit of José of CTA. Surprised as he must have been to be contacted, out of the blue, at night, for a different sort of job than is his usual line of work, a job with vague details, and a considerable time crunch... all of that notwithstanding, he was up for helping. He didn't in fact do that repair job (ultimately a handful of handymen fixed it) but his response helped me out in another way. It got me thinking of yet another José, who was not a caterer, who was in fact, a carpenter. I'm thinking of the José we heard about in the today's gospel reading, José whose name is sometimes pronounced Joseph. On Christmas Eve we hear of the birth of Jesus, according to the gospel of Luke, an account which highlights Mary's role and perspective. This first Sunday of Christmas, we hear about the birth of Jesus, according to the gospel of Matthew, which highlights the role of Joseph, José of Nazareth.

Joseph, the gospel tells us, had been engaged to Mary, but was not living with her. When he found out she was pregnant, it appeared that she had broken her promises to him. There were three things he could have done.

A first option was a loud one: Joseph could have let everyone know that this was not right. This was not his child. This was not his problem. He was not accountable for it or for any wrongdoing. In fact he was the one who had been wronged. This first option is one that many people take, in many situations. Surely at times we have taken this option ourselves. I know I have. It's the first thing that comes to mind, after all, when we see something that doesn't make sense, we point it out, we call it out. That's often the first thing we do when we see something that others might criticize, do criticize, we often do, too, we add our voices to the chorus. We say something about how bad things are, because, after all, they often are, bad. Saying what's wrong is not hard to do, after all, it's easy. It's not just easy, it's satisfying. Joseph could have

done this—and he would have been in the right. He was right, it wasn't his child. But doing so would have done great wrong, to Mary. It would have led to public disgrace for her, and perhaps even more: not just verbal assaults, but physical ones. In that day and age unwed mothers could be stoned to death. Joseph would have been right, but he would not have been righteous. He would have been self-righteous.

Another option Joseph might have taken, a second option, was not so loud, not so public. The second option Joseph could have taken was to dismiss Mary, quietly, not marry her, but not make a scene of it, just separate himself from the situation: tell Mary to go her way and he would go his, and they would just not talk about it. In fact, the Bible tells us, Joseph had decided to do this. Joseph was going to go with option two, because he was a righteous man and he did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. I think there is the sense, here, that Joseph made this decision from a place of kindness, and I have always admired this about Joseph, that he wasn't going to make a big deal of it. It's probably the Midwesterner in me, innately nervous about loud emotions. But the more I think of it, the less sure I am that this quieter option would actually have been kind—or that it would have avoided exposure, for Mary. One can only hide a pregnancy for so long. Eventually the belly exposes itself, and the baby, too. Quiet dismissals do, too. Quiet dismissals rarely stay quiet; they have a way of being exposed and of causing exposure, causing an environment that is lacking in—that disses—grace. Now without a doubt, verbal and physical assaults, which are often the outcomes of option one, without a doubt verbal and physical assaults are terrible ways to treat someone. But silence can be, too. It can be terribly painful when someone will not talk to you, when they just cut you out. That particular kind of silence—not saying anything about a difficult situation—that silence can be deafening; that silence can be a kind of death.

You and I have probably have experience with that, too—we live in a broken world. This being the case, this being our world, there are times that call for going one's own way. There are times when a separation is best, whether with a written, or an unwritten, nondisclosure agreement. There are times when the less said the better. In a broken world, the second option can be a righteous option.

But it is not the option Joseph took, it is not the gospel story, the good news, that we hear today, it is not the way in which the birth of the Messiah took place. The birth of the Messiah took place in this way, the gospel of Matthew tells us, when Joseph went with option three. Not option one: Joseph did not need to let all now how right he was. Nor did Joseph need to say so quietly just to himself; option two, which would have been righteous, but would have walled him in and others out, not least of whom, God. Joseph went with option three, because he was the kind of guy who could be contacted, out of the blue, at night, for something that was not his usual line of work, with vague details and a time crunch. Instead of a text message, God sent Joseph an angel. The angel's message, via dream, was: "Hi from God. I have a job for you. It's small, (baby-sized), but will have a big impact. I need to you, ASAP. Can you help?" And Joseph said yes, because that's the kind of character he was. That's the kind of character he had. He was not wed to what society or his own honor required, instead he was wed to Mary, the mother of our Lord.

This is how the Messiah was born, and is born, today, and every day: when people put relationship over righteousness, and so discover a higher righteousness, a higher calling, our vocation as Christians: to become part of God's saving work. This is the incredible claim of this Christmas gospel, this is God's incredible invitation, to Joseph, and to us: we too can be part of this, even, we can be parent to it, to God's holy work of repairing the universe.