

“Stepping Into the Waves . . . When Your Already Doing the Right Thing”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
For an Advent series, Stepping Into the Waves

Matthew 1:18-25

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Please read Matthew 1:18-25. You can see it [here](#).

What do we know about Joseph? He is righteous. He is faithful. He is just. In the Bible that is all one idea.¹ Righteousness–faithfulness–justice. That’s Joseph.

Joseph is sort-of-married to Mary. Marriage was a two-step process. They’ve been brought together. They’ve made promises of faithfulness to each other. That’s part one. Now, they are waiting for part two. In the meantime, they are not intimate, not living together, probably not even alone together.

That’s the honourable way, and that’s Joseph’s way. He is righteous–faithful–just. That is Joseph’s boat.

II

I am using “boat” as a symbol here. I am meaning that which secures him. It’s the basic character and commitments that keep Joseph afloat, especially when storms hit.

If you’ve been with us these past few weeks, you know that this “boat” idea comes from the time when Jesus called his disciple Peter to come to where he was. To come to where Jesus was, Peter needed to step out of his boat in the middle of a windy, wavy lake. He needed to step onto the water and into the waves to come to Jesus.

I’m using this image of stepping out of our boat, and stepping into the waves to come to where Jesus is. How does it help us hear new things in these stories that lead up to Jesus’ birth? Like Joseph’s story.

It seems to me that Joseph’s “boat” is his righteousness–faithfulness–justice. [EUC: You can imagine the words written on the side.] For him, this is not an abstract principle. It is how he walks with God, every moment, every day. Righteousness–faithfulness–justice . . . Joseph has got a strong boat!

That’s good, because it’s gotten stormy!

¹ These reflect different translation choices made to render the Greek word “*dikaios*” into English. *Dikaiois* itself is a translation of the Hebrew word *misphat*.

III

His Mary is pregnant. Joseph knows it's not his! That tears him apart. He is angry.²

What should he do? What's the right thing to do? Put yourself in Joseph's shoes, knowing only what Joseph knows at this point. Ever been betrayed? What does righteousness—faithfulness—justice look like when you've been betrayed?

Maybe it is about rewarding what is right, and punishing what is wrong? It makes sense that people carry the consequences of their actions. So, should Joseph expose Mary's infidelity?

It could be the end of her. Stoning someone for adultery was probably not very common, but it happened. More likely, Mary would be forever humiliated, stigmatized and shunned. Her baby too.

With his anger and pain, if Joseph denounced her, repudiated her and demanded his justice . . . would that be right? Could you blame him?

IV

Joseph has learned about righteousness—faithfulness—justice from God. God's righteousness—faithfulness—justice is filled with mercy.

Again, if we only know what Joseph knows, then Mary has betrayed him. He is hurt. He decides to end their betrothal. That's his right. But he will do it quietly. He will bring no charge against her. Yes, folks try sucking him into the gossip about Mary. No, Joseph will stay quiet.

That's good. It's noble, this path Joseph has chosen. His righteousness—faithfulness—justice will keep, guide and carry him through this storm. He will protect Mary from a charge of adultery. I expect she will still be shamed, stigmatized and shunned, though maybe, without Joseph fueling it, it will flame out after a while. Some might even have pity for her. It will be the sort of pity we have for people who have messed up their life. That's how people will see Mary.

² All major English translations tell us that Joseph was "considering" or "thinking about" what to do (v. 20). However, the Greek word can be translated much more strongly, conveying a sense of "angering inside." To me this makes more sense than a dispassionate Joseph coolly weighing the options. He is angry. He stews inside. See Kenneth E. Bailey's discussion of how to translated *enthymēomai* in "The Genealogy and Joseph the Just," Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 45.

V

I want to suggest that this small-town, soap-opera has been playing out the way it often does. And I want to suggest that Joseph has been navigating his way through this storm quite well. He is righteous–faithful–just. That’s his boat. It’s proving, once again, to be a good boat. There is nothing wrong with what Joseph is doing. This is important: his righteousness–faithfulness–justice boat is leading Joseph to do the right thing!

Except God calls Joseph to step out of this good boat. To step out of it and into the waves.

God’s messenger intrudes into Joseph’s tossing and turning, and tells him what is really going on. *Your Mary has been faithful. Her baby is the Holy Spirit’s gift. God’s salvation plan is unfolding. And you, Joseph, are part of it.*

Joseph is righteous–faithful–just. God calls Joseph into more. God calls Joseph into God’s righteousness–faithfulness–justice. God’s righteousness–faithfulness–justice is far richer than simply giving folks what they deserve. God’s righteousness–faithfulness–justice is far more than showing mercy, even.

God’s righteousness–faithfulness–justice goes to those who are not righteous–faithful–just.

Stepping out the boat is about going to where Jesus is. The only way Joseph can be where Jesus is, is to leave behind the good boat of his righteousness–faithfulness–justice. To leave it behind and give his life to Mary. Joseph needs to do more than just the right thing.

Actually, many will think it is the wrong thing. What do you think happens to Joseph’s reputation? By staying with the obviously pregnant out-of-wedlock Mary, what do you imagine people will say about him? That he is righteous-faithful-just? Not likely!

Joseph needs to go where Mary is, and stay with her. Because, quite literally, where Mary is, is where Jesus is.

VI

What might that look like for us?

We would say that someone who is righteous–faithful–just is a good person, right?

Joseph shows me that Jesus’ call to us is not simply about being good people. Good people are, well, good. More people living righteously–faithfully–justly would make a better world. Jesus’ call to us is not instead of being righteous–faithful–just.

But Jesus’ call to us is different. He calls us to be with him. Where is Jesus? With those

who are righteous–faithful–just? Sure. Even more, he is with those who are not.

Going to where Jesus is, we end up alongside people who are not good. Keeping company with Jesus, we find ourselves alongside those who are undeserving. We discover that his church is not a collection of good people, a neat-and-tidy gathering of those who are righteous–faithful–just (or, who think they are). Actually, it is those who know they are not righteous–faithful–just who know how much they need to be with Jesus.

Jesus came to those who were considered not moral, who were thought to be bad people, who had tarnished reputations. He started with his mother, for that's exactly what people would have been saying about Mary.

So just like happened to Joseph, stepping out of our good boat and into the waves will lead us into stuff we have never imagined. Most important, we will find Jesus there.

Fitting, isn't it, that it's Joseph, this earthly father, who does this. Because that's what Mary's son, God-the-Son, has done. In Jesus, God has stepped out of the boat himself. God has come to us who are not righteous-faithful-just.

That's very good news. Amen.