

## ISAIAH 7:10-16

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup>Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup>He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup>For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

## MATTHEW 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',  
which means, 'God is with us.'<sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## SERMON

It wasn't supposed to end up this way, right? Joseph and Mary, they were a pretty good match. Nothing the tabloids would concern themselves with, no paparazzi waiting out front to catch a photo of them holding hands or sharing dinner, but a perfectly respectable pairing. Joseph was righteous, Mary, she was a good girl who came from a good family. And then she went and messed it all up, getting herself pregnant.

See, good Jewish girls didn't go and get themselves pregnant by an unknown father in the months before their weddings. And the consequences for such girls—oh they were dire indeed. Because the community could not suffer a wonton woman to live. Quite literally. Women caught in adultery, you all know what could happen to them, right? You know the story from later in Jesus life, when the woman is drug out into the street, and everyone says

to Jesus—what should we do with her!? We must stone her. And Jesus bends down into the sand and traces a few things with his finger. Then he looks up and says—well, go ahead then, the one of you who is without sin, go ahead and cast the first stone. And one by one they drop their stones and walk away. So, whether you know it or not, you know what end Mary should have come to. What end that yet unborn Christ child should have come to. Stoned for her sinful ways, publicly, because pregnancy is nothing if not a public condition.

You know what's really interesting to me? As I was thinking about Joseph this week, it's the first time I'd ever connected those two stories, but they kind of belong together, right? A woman caught to be dallying outside of wedlock could be stoned—that's the story of both Mary, Jesus' own mom, and the woman caught in adultery. I've often wondered what Jesus was writing, leaning down there in the dirt, and I feel like this is the first year I might have a clue—how could he not have been thinking about his own mom? A teenage girl, caught out in her secret, easily put out to be stoned by a mob. Honestly, it's the first time I had actually put together how dire Mary's situation might have felt to her. Because unwed teenage pregnancy certainly isn't popular today, but it's not a capital offence, right? But not back then. Whether it was acted on or not, the fact remains, women could be stoned for this behavior, and the threat, to me, is enough to be terrifying.

Mary's pregnancy—if ever a family had a secret to keep, this seems like one worth keeping.

And it's really interesting to think about the two ways this family went about holding the secret. First, there's Mary's path. Mary skipped town, probably at the behest of her parents, and she went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth, as we know, welcomed Mary joyfully—praising the young pregnant girl for doing the good, hard work of bearing the savior of the world. Countless sermons have explored questions of what the two women did as they prepared for the birth of their babies—Jesus and John the Baptist. I've preached that sermon, right? It's a beautiful and compelling scene, the mothers together. But what's really interesting for me this year is that Mary and Elizabeth paint a beautiful scene, in part because it feels safe for Mary, right? When Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house, there's no judgement, only celebration. The burden of Mary's great secret is lifted, if only in this one little house, and Mary is free to be fully herself again. What a gift, to be in the presence of someone who knows your deepest, darkest secret, and yet loves you all the same?

Then there's the other part of this family—Joseph. And Joseph, as usual for dads in many stories about children and pregnancy, he gets short shrift in the Bible. We don't know a lot about what he was up to. What we know about him is this: Joseph was a righteous man, and from all our study of Esther and Ruth, we know "righteousness" isn't a word the Bible uses lightly. Joseph was genuinely a good guy, he clearly followed the law, but it seems he also cared deeply for Mary. Because when she starts to show, when this pregnancy can no longer be covered up with flowing robes and carrying objects just so in front of her belly, Joseph reacts more kindly than he has to. Joseph decides not to make a big public do about the whole thing. He doesn't risk Mary's safety, her life, or even, it seems, her reputation. Instead, Matthew tells us, he goes about dismissing her quietly, privately

breaking off the engagement. Keeping this secret, secret. But the night before, something miraculous happens—Joseph’s own experience of the annunciation.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, do not be afraid. Be with Mary, raise her child, for that baby, he is the messiah! He is Jesus! Do not be afraid. And Joseph wakes up and does just that. He marries Mary, and he proceeds to raise Jesus as his own son. Joseph is indeed righteous.

Too often we skip to the end with Joseph—to the marriage and the baby and the woodworking. Instead, let’s pause for a moment with Joseph right before he falls asleep that night. Mary may already be off at Elizabeth’s house, hiding her pregnancy from the community, sharing her secret with a trusted cousin, rejoicing in the coming birth.

But Joseph, he’s alone. It’s night. And he’s come to a decision—let her go quietly. No fanfare, no fuss, no risk to her life. Just end it. And I imagine to Joseph, this secret must have felt so heavy. He must have felt very alone that night, in the quiet of his own bed, with this very difficult truth weighing on his heart, the future he had planned crumbling to pieces in front of him.

And we get the idea he might have felt this way because of the angel. When the messenger of the Lord arrives, the first thing the angel says is “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” This is curious. When angels show up, we’re accustomed to them saying “be not afraid,” right? Because angels, the Bible tells us, were terrifying. They were fiery and bright and unexpected, and every time they pop up they’re always telling people—simmer down! Don’t be afraid! It’s just me! But in this story, the angel isn’t telling Joseph not to be afraid of the angel...he’s telling Joseph, “don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” The worst thing in Joseph’s world, his greatest fear, his heaviest burden in this moment, in this dark night of his soul, it isn’t the terrifying heavenly being that just appeared! The deepest and most fearful secret of Joseph’s mind and heart is the pregnancy of his betrothed—it’s Mary’s secret.

And marrying Mary, it would take courage for Joseph to do. Because there would be talk. There would be chatter, there would be rumors, there would be questioning looks and craning necks. But, there would also be a baby—a son, the messiah, Jesus, born to Mary, raised by Joseph. A child given to him. Making this secret public—it wasn’t without cost, but to live in the freedom of raising Jesus, it seems the angel told Joseph, and Joseph believed, that it would be worth any cost to just tell the truth.

All of us have our secrets. Some are bigger than others. But in being human, we all carry stories and truths about ourselves, about what we’ve done, about what we’ve experienced, about what’s been done to us, about what we do or don’t know...we carry things we’d rather no one knows about us. Why? I think almost always it’s because we worry it’ll change how people see us. If my boss knows I can’t read very well, I’ll get fired at worst, at best, all my coworkers will just think I’m stupid. If my kids knew that I made a poor choice in my teens, they’ll respect me less...and then maybe they’ll think it’s ok to do it as well. If my addiction is made known, maybe my mom will force me to deal with it, maybe I’ll even

have to go to rehab, and everyone will hate me. They'll just think I lack willpower and that I'm worthless. If the church finds out about my daughter and her issue, they'll all think of me differently, they'll know I'm a terrible parent, that I failed my own kid.

Our secrets, no matter what they are, they tie us up in knots of fear and anxiety, they tell us the lie that if other people know—well, we'll be dragged out into the streets and publicly stoned, at least metaphorically. Our secrets tell us we're unlovable, that we're irredeemable, that we're worthless, that we aren't as good or valuable or whatever as others. They're those little tapes that play on a loop in the back of our heads—telling us those same messages over and over again—you're fat, you're ugly, you're mean, you're not worthy of the affection of others, you're stupid, you're a failure.

And what we know about secrets, is that when they're kept in the shadows, they rot us from the inside out. They destroy us.

But when secrets are shared, something nearly magical takes place. When secrets are shared—not with everyone, not on the front page of the paper or over Facebook or with every Tom Dick and Harry that you know. When secrets are shared, appropriately, with trustworthy folks—they lose their power over us, and we gain the accountability we need to live fuller lives and to realize our own worth.

When Mary shared her secret with Elizabeth, she was met with joy! Elizabeth, instead of shaming her for her unexpected and problematic pregnancy, she celebrated. Mary's secret was known, and Elizabeth still loved Mary deeply.

When Mary's secret was known, when Joseph agreed to continue with the betrothal, that secret lost its power over him. Was it still difficult? Sure! Was he still afraid of marrying her? I'm sure he had his second thoughts. But when he agreed to take Jesus as his own son, to name him, to raise him, to marry his mother—the secret of Mary and Joseph's shame was no longer a fearful grief held over them. They were, in a sense, free.

All of our families have secrets. And I do not advocate telling everyone, everywhere, everything. That's clearly ridiculous. There are stories we keep private, there are facts about ourselves we restrict to our closest friends, the folks who know us most deeply. There are stories we cannot tell. I know this full well. As a pastor, one of the greatest privileges of my position is the secrecy of the stole. Not in the sense of secret keeping, but in the sense of confidence. Like attorney-client or doctor-patient privilege. It is indeed a privilege to be a repository of peoples stories and fears, to be the person whose job it is to say again and again—it does not matter what your story is, God loves you, I will be with you, and you don't need to be afraid. The complexity and the difficulty of the stories I have been told, I wish I could show you all what it looks like, and the redemption I've seen! It's blisteringly beautiful.

But it's not reserved for clergy or lawyers or doctors alone, right? This is a gift we can give one another. To be the people who say—your secrets do not define you and they are not

the only stories which give your life worth. And no matter what your story is—you are beloved of God, a member of this community, and your life is valuable. Don't be afraid!

It's the gift Joseph gives us. The courage to be honest about our secrets, to confront the fear that weighs us down, and to give up the shame which keeps us bound. To say "yes" to the difficult stories, to be honest about our stories, and to make the hard choices, knowing full well that God's love and God's righteousness redeem even the most hopeless of secrets.