

Accepting: Joseph of Bethlehem (Advent 2)

Matthew 1:18-24 & Micah 5:2-5a

Call to Worship: Hebrews 1:1-4

December 5, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

We have several expressions in English that say much the same thing: “Bloom where you’re planted.” “Make the best of it,” or a variation “Make the best of a bad situation.” “Put up with it.” “Take the bad with the good.” “Grin and bear it.” They all kind of mean the same thing: it’s a rough season, but we can get through it.

We’ve probably used at least one of these phrases in the last couple of years, as we’ve tried to figure out how to fight a pandemic, and as we’re figuring out still how to live with a pandemic. It’s one thing to make the best of a bad situation for a few weeks, but when it stretches into months and now years, grinning and bearing it isn’t at all fun, not even a little bit. Taking the bad with the good is way out of balance. It’s hard for us to accept, we don’t want to accept, we aren’t ready to accept, maybe we never will be able to accept, that this is just the way things are for the foreseeable future. Accepting a disappointing and disorienting change in our lives, long-term, is several steps beyond just putting up with something for a limited time.

As our reading opens today, Joseph is in the process of “making the best of a bad situation.” The situation is bad, no other way around it. He is engaged to be married, to Mary. It’s a legal agreement between her family and his, not something that is intended to be broken or ended in any way except a marriage ceremony. Our imaginations can fill in exactly how this conversation happened—whether it was between Mary and Joseph, or between her father and his, but Joseph has come to know that Mary is expecting a baby. That’s all he knows. He knows that he isn’t the father, and his completely reasonable assumption is that Mary has been unfaithful to him and their engagement. It’s a bad situation for all parties. Joseph was within his rights to break the engagement contract; indeed, Mary’s presumed actions had already put it in jeopardy. But that would have left Mary vulnerable to punishment for adultery, and the law allowed for that punishment to be stoning. He decides the way to make the best of this bad situation, because he is a “righteous man,” Matthew tells us, is to dismiss her quietly. This isn’t great either, because everyone will assume that Joseph himself is responsible for the pregnancy, and then broke off the engagement. It leaves

Joseph looking pretty crummy, but protects Mary from the worst possible outcomes. It's a "grin and bear it" circumstance for Joseph. It's not going to be easy, no matter what decision he makes.

Then he manages to fall asleep—and if you've ever been in a life-changing, stressful situation, you know his ability to fall asleep is a feat in and of itself—he manages to fall asleep and dreams of an angel messenger. Just like his Old Testament ancestor Joseph, of the coat of many colors, this Joseph receives clear vision and instructions from God in a dream. Don't dismiss Mary. Take her as your wife, because the baby is from the Holy Spirit, is to be the Savior, is to be named Jesus.

The situation isn't a "grin and bear it," "make the best of it," kind of situation after all. It's a "accept that this is the new normal and the way things are going to be" situation. And Joseph doesn't seem to fight against that. He doesn't seem to resist changing his mind or his plans. He accepts the angel's message in his dream, and he continues to accept it after he wakes up. He abandons the "make the best of it" plan and accepts the change in his life. He takes Mary as his wife.

That part of Joseph that accepted God's direction, God's will, God's disruptive intervention in his life. That part of Joseph that not just accepted all that, but then obeyed what God told him to do. Even accepting and obeying wouldn't have insulated Joseph from all kinds of raised eyebrows and whispered gossip and disapproval from Mary's family and friends and fellow townspeople. It wasn't an easy thing the angel had told him to do. But he accepted and obeyed.

Does Joseph remind you of anyone? He accepted God's will and obeyed. That baby named Jesus would grow up to accept God's will for his life, though it was the most difficult of all messages and instructions. And he obeys. Joseph may not be present later in the story, and it's not at all clear if Joseph lived to see Jesus as an adult, but Joseph's character is present in the acceptance and obedience to God's will that Jesus demonstrated.

Hearing and accepting and obeying God's will for our lives is of course not easy. Joseph's story reminds us of that. Each step is hard—the hearing, the accepting, the obeying. But Joseph's story also makes it clear that hearing and accepting and obeying God's will is within our human capabilities. Let's listen hard. Let's accept when God tells us to make a change, even if it's difficult. And let's obey what God asks of us.