

If we prepare ourselves, and if we help to prepare each other, it will happen in our lives, too. If we get to know God through the scriptures and the Church and each other, and if we get to know ourselves, we will become partners with God in the redemption of the world--partners with God in bringing the kingdom of God to Earth.

Joseph and Mary were partners with God. Mary said, "Let it be to me according to God's will." And by her submissive obedience to God she became the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph became a man willing to do God's will, also, so that by his submissive obedience to God he led Mary and Jesus on a journey which blessed us all.

It's believed that Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience--a patriarchal audience--and I suppose that's why he focuses on the story through the eyes of a man, Joseph. We hear about how Joseph is visited by angels and given special directions that lead the whole family through a difficult journey away from the murderous Herod and back again to their homeland.

First, an angel speaks to Joseph and convinces him to marry Mary. I love that scene from our Christmas pageant last Sunday. One of our young children says to another, "I'm gonna marry you anyway, Mary." That's our playwright pastor and his dialogue.

Joseph agreed to marry Mary, even though it would bring shame on him, because no one's going to believe that the child she bears comes from the Holy Spirit. And yet he obeys, and embarks on a risky, life-changing journey, the instructions for which are never laid out for him in full. Instead, he gets only one glimpse at a time, guiding him in only the next step. He receives specific instructions--something you couldn't get from the scriptures--the voice of the Living God

whispering in his ear and telling him to do one strange, risky, self-sacrificing thing after another.

The instructions that Mary and Joseph receive would seriously derail their lives. Those instructions would lead them to flee, to become refugees--to flee into Egypt. Thankfully, they were received in Egypt rather than sent back to the land of danger, the land of Herod, the land of murderous intent. Their journey is unplanned and unexpected, and it takes them to a foreign land where people speak a foreign language. Joseph becomes estranged from family, from friends, from his business contacts, from his customers. In fact, his entire culture becomes completely out of reach. He is told the child Jesus will grow up and save people from their sins, but how could any man possibly understand what that would mean for his own days and months and years?

Joseph never fully understands and he is never shown the full picture. The brief angelic instructions he receives show him only one step at a time. How does he cope during all the hours and days and months during which there is no angelic accompaniment? For that matter, how do we cope in those times? How did the apostles cope when they were called back down from their mountaintop experience to return to the valley of harsh reality?

Joseph must rely on faith to sustain him with hope and courage all along the way. We might think the major story about Joseph is the miraculous intervention of angels. But maybe the major story is one of faith, because it is faith that sustains him during all those dark days and months and years when he does not know what will come next.
(pause)

The call of God to Mary and Joseph derailed their lives. It brought them struggle, social estrangement, financial hardship, threats to their physical well-being, threats to their reputations, and tons of uncertainty and upheaval. That's what they got. That's what they got for having nurtured their souls to the point where they could hear and obey these specific, unexpected commands from God. That's what they got for having obtained, through practice in smaller matters, the will to do God's will over and against their own.

This is what they got for following the commands of God: they got big burdens. That's what they got for growing spiritually and dedicating their lives to something bigger than themselves, bigger than their own personal goals, bigger than their own family plans. That's what they got for their dedication to holy living--a frightening life, a confusing life, a life with big burdens.

But they also got the opportunity to be partners with God in bringing the kingdom of God to Earth. And when we follow in their footsteps, we get the same kind of opportunity. How we should follow in their footsteps, I couldn't possibly tell you because, as it was for Joseph and Mary, so it is for us: we need specific instructions we can't get directly from others, and sometimes we need those instructions. So I can't tell you where your journey should be going, or where you're going to get those specific instructions, but we know all about what the Church, what the scriptures, what we can do for each other to become sensitive to God's call and to become willing to follow God's will.

Mary and Joseph got big upheaval and big burdens for their righteous obedience, and many years later, they got joy when it was fully revealed to them what is the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. I'm convinced they didn't fully understand anything

until the Lord was resurrected. And even then they were dependent on the Holy Spirit to guide them; the Church didn't start out right at that moment. So they did eventually get their joy.

And what do we get? Something you may not have thought of. We get a lot from them, of course. I'll suggest that what we get from them is an example of the beatitudes in the flesh. Steve read for us from chapter 2 in the gospel according to Matthew, but just two pages beyond that, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and giving them what we now call the beatitudes. Listen to this excerpt from Matthew chapter 5 verses 1 through 10. And as you listen, think about Joseph and Mary, and how they are examples of these beatitudes for us: "Blessed are the poor . . . blessed are those who mourn . . . blessed are the meek . . . blessed are the pure in heart . . . blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Joseph and Mary are like Abraham and Moses, like all the prophets, all the apostles, and all those in the 2000 years that have followed by whose blood, sweat, and tears the church has been established. Blessed are all those who, in our day, make sacrifices large and small for the gospel so that it can be proclaimed and promoted. Blessed are they who are willing to turn away from personal worldly goals and worldly rewards to answer the specific calling of God in their lives--the calling of a living Lord Jesus alive and well and whispering in our ears specific instructions we would never hear or obey had we not come to know God and ourselves deeply and fully.

You and I can grow spiritually and psychologically to become like them. And the world is counting on it. It's a dark place, but the light of Christ--when it shines brightly--or the salt of the earth--when it hasn't lost its flavor--can change the world. We can, more and more,

become partners with God for the sake of our children and grandchildren and those of others, and for the sake of our own joy. We find joy in knowing we are partners with a self-sacrificing, loving God, even when it means upheavals and burdens in our lives.

Blessed are we when we chart our life journeys as Joseph did--by the word of the living Lord specifically tailored for you and for me. Blessed are we then--the big and the small, the noticed and the unnoticed, the heralded and the unheralded, the credited and the discredited. Blessed are we then, for ours is the kingdom of God, and by our generous efforts and sacrifices the kingdom of God is more clearly revealed in this crazy world which so needs that revelation. Blessed are those who have gone faithfully before us. And blessed are we.

Blessed be our loving God in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.