

Message: “Faith of Joseph”

“My husband wants me to stop bringing up his affair because he has ‘repented.’ What about me? He acts like nothing has happened, but I walk with anger. I cry out to God every day, but the hurt is still fresh.”¹

These words speak to a difficult season of life. We want to somehow give this woman hope, reach out and hug her, and let her know there is a calm place for anyone walking through a storm.

That calm is Jesus. He will never let us down. Victoria, the woman who wrote this story, knew from experience.

Victoria and Brad* were married for 15 months when he told her he wasn’t happy and wanted out. She was devastated, but not totally surprised. Victoria suspected he’d been seeing someone else. They continued living under the same roof, but their hearts weren’t united. Their daughter had just turned one and Victoria wondered if their life as a family was over.

Lucy, a godly older woman, began mentoring her. “Don’t seek out what is going on right now,” she said. “God knows. Just try to allow God to give you as much information as God knows you can handle.”

Lucy helped her find out what God says about divorce. Lucy also helped her understand that instead of trying to change Brad, Victoria needed to allow God to do some changing in her. She began praying and God showed her she could win Brad over with purity and reverence for God. The best part was she could do this without a word, which was a good thing since they’d stopped communicating.

The Lord taught Victoria she needed to renew her mind daily.

She needed to make a conscious effort to think about things that were pure, right, true, lovely, and worthy of praise. God reminded her - perfect love casts out all fear. Victoria stopped praying Brad would fall back in love with her. Instead, she started praying he would fall in love with God. She started praying for herself, that she’d have hope. Victoria relied on the angel’s words to Mary “*Nothing will be impossible with God*” (Luke 1:37).

¹ <https://www.familylife.com/articles/topics/marriage/troubled-marriage/infidelity/after-the-affair-rebuilding-our-marriage/>

Victoria didn't know who or what Brad was walking toward when he left the house every morning. Every day, she resisted the temptation to find out. As Lucy advised, Victoria trusted God to prepare her for learning the truth when she'd be strong enough to handle it. She read the Word and asked God to give her comfort and encouragement. Victoria waited and prayed. She cried and fasted.

One Sunday, Brad left a note saying he was moving out for good. "Where was God?" she wondered. Less than 24 hours later, Brad came home broken, weeping, and contrite. He confessed he'd been having an affair for a year. He intended to marry the woman but just couldn't go through with it. Brad said he wanted his family back.

God enabled Victoria to forgive Brad the very day he confessed the affair. It wasn't easy. She knew Brad needed the Lord's forgiveness and hers, and she trusted God to put their marriage back together. Victoria didn't need time to forgive, but she did need time to allow the Lord to make new what was old and broken. She remembers thinking, *"God, is that all? Does Brad just get to come home and that's it?"*

Victoria admits to having a conversation with God that went something like this:

Her: God, it's not fair.

God: You're right.

Her: He deserves punishment.

God: Yes, he does.

Her: In the Old Testament you had adulterers put to death.

God: Yes, I did.

Her: Brad deserves to die.

God: Yes, he does and I put my only Son on the cross to die in his place. It was good enough for me and now you need to decide if it's good enough for you.

It's natural to want a spouse to suffer for hurting us so deeply.

Maybe that's why some people walk away from an unfaithful spouse; in a small way, it's making the other person suffer. Divorce may be necessary, but the sin has already been taken care of by Jesus Christ.

Over time Victoria learned what a huge amount of courage it took for Brad to turn away from his sin and confess it face-to-face with her. If she hadn't waited on God, she'd have missed out on seeing her husband's godly sorrow lead him to full repentance. When Brad confessed his affair, Victoria thought she'd never stop thinking about it. She'd remember it over and over again for the rest of her life. But that hasn't been her experience. It's as though the affair never happened.

You may wonder if this is too good to be true. The fact is: God changed their marriage! The transformation didn't happen overnight. It took a long time for Victoria's heart to heal. Over 12 years, they worked through a lot of stuff. You don't just forgive and instantly heal.

Forgiveness and healing are two different things. Forgiveness is a decision in the beginning. Making the decision allows one to heal and rebuild trust. Over the years Victoria watched God reconcile Brad and turn his heart and affections back to her. Brad grew into a very spiritual man. God brought teachers to mentor and teach them. God has done amazing things through their family. Victoria and Brad have five children and they are missionaries in Africa. Their story encourages friends, family and others even though they are thousands of miles away.

What a story! It shows us forgiveness and healing are possible, no matter how deeply we are hurt. When I read this story, I thought about Mary and Joseph. What would it be like for her to find herself pregnant, yet engaged? It must have taken great courage for her to tell Joseph, knowing he'd suspect the worst. How would Joseph feel and respond? He'd feel like Victoria did; hurt, betrayed and angry. That's the parallel to follow here. I think Victoria was living out a modern day version of what Joseph was experiencing. The difference, of course, is that Mary's situation was different from Brad's. Nevertheless, the idea that the Holy Spirit would make your fiancée pregnant would be very hard to accept. It's too far outside our understanding. It would be difficult for anyone. We'd be very suspicious, wondering where to turn.

It's like being suspicious of the GPS in your phone. You know the scenario: you're following the directions to a destination where you've never been. Then you're directed to make a turn that just doesn't feel right. You're in an area of the city that doesn't look right. The directions

keep coming, but they don't seem to be on the right path. It's hard to keep trusting the disembodied voice telling you how to get to your destination. We might want to give up. Or turn it off and "use the force, Luke," which often means just doing what feels right. And that's a recipe for disaster more times than we'd like to admit. Trust is needed.

Isaiah and Matthew give us different versions of what trust means.

Our Hebrew Scripture is an odd exchange between the prophet and Ahaz, the king of Judah. If you start at the beginning of chapter seven, you see Ahaz's problem is that he's under threat from both friends and enemies. The king of Israel and the king of Aram made a pact to attack Judah and Jerusalem. The attack wasn't successful, but it caused Ahaz and all his people to be afraid (Isaiah 7:2).

God sends Isaiah to Ahaz to tell him to trust in God's protection.

Ahaz isn't quite convinced, so God speaks through Isaiah and says, "Ask for a sign from your GOD. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!" (v10, MSG) - a virtual blank check. Ahaz says "no." He's not going to ask for a sign. He says, "I won't put the Lord to the test."

It sounds like the right thing to do, especially for those of us who have Jesus' words in mind. During the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus said exactly the same thing. The thing is, Jesus was responding to Satan. Ahaz was responding to God. Big difference! When God wants you to ask for a sign, you better ask for a sign. Ahaz was saying he didn't need a sign. He'd handle it on his own. He wasn't willing to trust in God. He wanted to trust in himself, his strength and his own defenses.

Isaiah tells us this lack of trust "wearies" God. God has heard it before and seen it before, many times. So God gives him the sign anyway. There's a woman with child, and that child is a sign of God's presence in the world. God tells Ahaz to pay attention - to see!, life continues, even in the face of conflict. Isaiah's point is this: there's always hope if you choose to look for it. We have to trust God promises while living with hope.

Today, we hear something more profound in the promise. We hear the promise of Jesus. That's why we read this text on the last Sunday of

Advent. Isaiah may or may not have known how God intended to use this sign a few hundred years later, but we can see it clearly. Or can we?

Joseph couldn't, at least not at first. On his own, he was planning to walk away. Trusting in his own wisdom, he was on the brink of saying "no." No to his marriage, no to this wild story, no to playing a secondary role in the story of salvation. Joseph wasn't going to make a fuss, but he was going to say "no."

The funny thing is, Matthew tells us Joseph was "a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace" (Matthew 1:19).

Joseph heard the news from Mary and was conflicted. The problem was the two things clashed, at least they used to. Calling a person righteous means they are obedient to the law. And the law called for public disgrace - at least as it was practiced at that time. That means the shame wouldn't be on Joseph and his family, but on Mary and hers. So, though he'd resolved to dismiss her quietly, Joseph was at war within himself as he went to sleep that night.

It was in this inner conflict the dream came and the angel spoke.

Suddenly, Joseph knew what to do. We want a little more inner debate as Joseph came to this new understanding, but Matthew doesn't indicate any struggle. Joseph woke up and did it.

Did what? Joseph went against the law in favor of love. Or better, he went against a rigid interpretation of the law in favor of the covenant between people and God. Joseph decided to trust in the Spirit of God. God led him to trust in the journey of faith. Joseph trusted God enough to name the child Jesus, which means "God is salvation."

Thank God for Joseph's faith and trust. What an example that is for us today. I believe Joseph's forgiveness and healing are a model for us, for the Victoria's and the Brad's of today. Faith changes things for the better.

Jesus' name is an invitation. We're invited to know Jesus. We can trust him. He is God incarnate. He is the hope and the promise of God, fulfilled. When we trust and believe in him, all things are possible. Forgiveness and healing are no longer strangers, but they are part of our lives. We, too, can walk the path of faith as surely as Joseph did.

On this, the last Sunday of Advent, I invite you to trust God and live by faith. Your life will be better when you do.

Let us pray ...

Isaiah 7:10-16 (CEB)

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.”

But Ahaz said, “I won’t ask; I won’t test the Lord.”

Then Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Isn’t it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God?

Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good.

Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.”

Matthew 1:18-25 (CEB)

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

*Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,
And they will call him, Emmanuel.*

(Emmanuel means “God with us.”)

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn’t have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.