

“Getting To and Through the Pain”

One of the great things about the Bible is that you can read verses or stories many times, and then you read them again, and something stands out and speaks to you in a way that it never did before. I've read the story of an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream many times, and thought about the details of Jesus' birth. But it's only more recently that I've reflected on Joseph himself - how hard it must have been for him, the feelings and emotions that must have engulfed him. Because we know how the story turned out, it's easy to miss the *human drama* involved!

Matthew writes: "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:18-19).

Mary was “pledged to be married” to Joseph – the King James Version says “betrothed”. “Betrothal” was a stage in the process of Jewish marriage – much more than people being engaged today. When a couple became betrothed it was like they were legally married. Betrothal lasted about a year, and during this time they were regarded as husband and wife, although they did not yet live together, and the women were to remain virgins. Any sexual intimacy with someone else during the betrothal period was treated as adultery. Betrothal was so binding on a couple that the only way it could be terminated was by divorce.

It was during this betrothal stage that Mary became pregnant. Try to imagine what must have gone on between Joseph and Mary! Mary at one point says to Joseph: “Joseph. We need to talk....I'm pregnant.” Now the words, “I'm pregnant” can mean a lot of things! For instance, to a couple who've been trying months or years to have a child, for the wife to say, “I'm pregnant” can bring sheer joy and a sense of exhilaration. Following a one night stand with someone you hardly know, those words can shatter one's life.

We can only guess at the dialogue between Joseph and Mary. “Joseph, I'm going to have a baby.” “Who were you with? Who's the guy?” “No one, Joseph. No one.....it was the Holy Spirit!” “Right!” “Joseph, I know this sounds far-out, but an angel appeared to me. The angel said I'd conceive and bear a son who'll be an heir to King David's throne. The baby in me is a holy child, the Son of God. Joseph, believe me, I've not been with another man. I've been faithful to our vows of betrothal!”

I mean, if these are *real people*, not stained-glass figures or baked-clay figurines in a Christmas crèche – think of the hurt and confusion Joseph must have been feeling. His sweetheart pregnant – and all he knew was that he wasn't the dad! If we imagine that Joseph readily accepted Mary's explanation, we're probably missing something...because the mood and feel of the text is that Joseph *struggled* over what to do. (Of course, we can only imagine the amount of turmoil and uncertainty that Mary felt also).

According to the law, Joseph had 2 choices: (1) Publicly expose Mary as an adulteress, thus shaming her, or (2) privately hand her a writ of divorce in the presence of 2 witnesses. This second option is what he decided to do.

For this young, godly, just man, there must have been some sleepless nights and plenty of acid indigestion! It's very easy to get caught up in the warmth and beauty of the Christmas story and miss the personal pain of Joseph (and Mary too).

I wonder if there isn't a Joseph inside each of us – a place of confusion, pain, hurt. As I've looked again at this familiar Christmas story, I've gotten more in touch with Joseph and his anguish. And I realize it's a story *about me – and probably you, too.* Don't we all experience hurt and pain, inside? I'm not talking *physical* pain here, but an *inward, emotional* pain that can be just as bad, if not worse: a strained relationship with someone we love, an experience of rejection or feelings of abandonment, grief over the loss of family member or friend, the pain of knowing our life isn't what it ought to be or what we want it to be.

What do you do with your pain? Christians talk a lot about how we ought to be sensitive to the pain of others and respond with compassion, but how do we respond to the pain *in our own lives*? Noted theologian/philosopher Paul Tillich once said, "Almost every person you meet is fighting a great battle inside." I believe that. And that includes *you, and me.* There is something very universal about Joseph's experience.

Now some of our emotional pain is pretty easy to understand – we can understand the cause and see the effect it has on us. We go through a separation or divorce and our self-worth takes a nose dive. We lose our job and we feel kind of lost and afraid. A loved one dies and we're feeling so alone and heartbroken.

But other wounds may be harder to pinpoint. They may originate way back in our childhood and be deeply rooted in past experiences. One of the reasons why, when I was in my late forties, early fifties, I spent four years training to be a marriage and family therapist. I saw people in churches who were a problem to themselves, creating turmoil in the congregations, because of unresolved emotional issues in their lives. I observed how dedicated Christians could be clueless as to why they acted as they did. I thought if I could learn some skills at helping people get in touch with their inner wounds and find healing, I could be more useful to the Lord. (Which is not to say that we clergy can't be just as sick inside. There can be a Joseph inside of us in spite of our theological training and the clergy garb that we may wear).

Where do you go with the pain and hurt inside you? Are you even in touch with it? One interesting facet of this is that people who become "rescuers" sometimes are doing this unconsciously as way of *avoiding their own pain!* Nurses, social workers, counselors, pastors, or just people who are always out there helping others.

When we look at Joseph in the Christmas narrative, we can see how God helps Joseph through the confusion and pain; and in Joseph's story we can get some clues as to how best to deal with our own struggles.

First, let's point out that Joseph took action. Matthew 1:19 tells us this: "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in

mind to divorce her quietly." A baby was on the way. Joseph chose not to just bury his head in the sand and pretend it never happened. Joseph did what he thought was best. So with tender consideration he decided quietly to divorce Mary, rather than expose her to public disgrace. Joseph took action. He faced the problem and dealt with it!

It's amazing sometimes how much we can deny our own emotional pain – or simply be out of touch with what's going on at a deeper level inside us. This is especially true of *men*. We think have to be tough, macho. Suck it up and keep going. But it's not just men who can *deny* our feelings, or *refuse to deal with* our hurt.

I talked with a couple. Their marriage was not going well. The lady especially was very active in the church. She could be rather snippy with people, and it was getting worse. She was at the center of little whirlwinds of fussing within the congregation. This woman had major abandonment issues with her mother, who was still living. This lady would distance herself from people – sometimes dump people. In reality, she'd cut off from them before they had chance *to abandon her*. Her behavior was creating all kinds of stress in her own family, and in the church. I talked with her about these underlying issues. She was somewhat aware of the pain around her mother's abandonment of her. I told her she had a choice: she could continue as she was, or she could start to work through these deep feelings of abandonment and find some inner healing. Her answer: "No, it would be too painful." Sadly, rather than take action, she put it off. But in the meantime, these unresolved emotional conflicts inside of her were discoloring and hampering all of her relationships.

We have a choice as to whether or not we want to deal with the emotional pain and dysfunction that may lie buried deep inside of us. What happens when we don't? Some people get depressed, and stay depressed. Some cover up their own pain by running around trying to help and rescue others. Other people project their own internal chaos onto others by criticizing them or striking out at them.

I have a pastor friend who was at his church about 2 years when he got a letter from someone in the church, unsigned. The letter writer said my pastor friend wasn't doing the church any good. Why doesn't he resign before he's fired. (In the United Methodist Church we can't "fire" our pastor!). My friend was upset, of course. The Sunday after he got the letter he was preaching about conflict in the church. In the sermon, he mentioned that he had gotten this anonymous letter, and that whoever wrote the letter was obviously *someone in a lot of pain*. Then my pastor friend went on to say this is not the way to deal with disagreements in the church.

A couple of days later the man who wrote the letter came to the parsonage. The pastor was not home. His wife called him where he was, and said this parishioner was at their house, and he was in great distress. When the pastor got there, the man apologized to him. He shared some of his concern for the church, but also opened up and talked about *his own personal pain*. So here was a man projecting his own personal turmoil onto my pastor friend.

We can choose to ignore or avoid any deeper pain in our lives – but it doesn't go away. It's there, getting in the way of our living joyful, productive lives.

The good news is that when we face our inward pain and take action and try to get some help, a more joyful and healthy life opens up for us. I did therapy once with a young couple who were constantly fighting. In the first session, you could just feel the hostility between them. The husband soon dropped out of therapy, so I continued working with the woman. As a child, a teenager, she had to do what her father wanted, or else be rejected. It was dad's way or no way. She was not allowed to think for herself or have her own feelings, without being punished. In reality, her wanting to develop her own sense of identity – to have her own thoughts and feelings – was *healthy and normal*. But when she tried that, the message she got from her dad was that she was rebellious, no-good. Truth be told, she was probably the healthiest one in that family system! At one point she was kicked out of the house. She slept some nights in a bus station.

As she began to re-visit some of the pain of those teenage years, she was able to see herself in a different way. She began to feel good about herself. The tension began to ease in her relationship with husband, and even with her kids.

See, we can choose to take action and deal with our inward wounds and hurts; or, we can choose to avoid or deny them. Fritz Pearls has a great line: "Nothing changes 'til it becomes what it is." Can we understand what he's saying? Nothing changes, until we look at the stuff going on inside of us, and call it what it really is!

Joseph took action. Though he was still confused and not sure what Mary's pregnancy meant, he did something to address the situation. But as we know, the story does not end there. For *God took action too!* God did something to let Joseph know that the Lord was with Him in all of his struggle and uncertainty. *God sent an angel!* And what did the angel say? "Don't be afraid!" "But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:20-21). Think how reassuring this must have been for Joseph! "Don't be afraid! You feel devastated. You're a broken man and not sure what's going on! *Don't be afraid*. Mary's telling you the truth! I'm in the middle of all of this!"

Wouldn't it be great if in the middle of all of our struggles and all of our inward confusion and pain God would send an angel to us to reassure us and help us! That doesn't usually happen, does it? When's the last time an angel visited you? Experiences with real live angels don't often come! But in Scripture, the word for "angel" also means "messenger". The Greek word used here, "angelos", can be translated "angel" or "messenger".

I believe God sends "angels" to us – messengers - whom God uses to help us and heal us and deliver us in the midst of our inward turmoil and pain. Who are some of the "angels" that have come across your path to mediate the mercy and healing of God for you?

Sometimes it can be *friend*. Occasionally even a *family member*. It might be a *counselor* (a pastor, therapist, psychiatrist). It could be a *book* you read or a *program* you watch – an author, a TV host or guest. Working part-time in the mental health field, I came to know a number of skilled and compassionate counselors and therapists whom God uses to help people deal with the deeper issues of their lives.

And you know what – I think God intends *the church* to be an “angel” that mediates Christ and His healing for our broken and wounded lives. In one church I served there was a marriage and family therapist who was active in the congregation. Then she moved away. I reconnected with her sometime later when she came back to the area and attended a wedding and reception. I asked how she was doing. She said that she was doing well. She maintained a private practice as a therapist, but she wasn't involved in a church anymore. She told me that in this period of her life she wanted to “go inward”. She longed for the spiritual, but said she didn't find it in the organized church. My heart sank. What I heard her saying was that she felt the church was a place where you have to put on a front, rather than being yourself, and being able to be loved and healed.

God does not want the Church to be a place where we have to put on a happy face and pretend that everything is well. I once heard about a church where all of the people are in small groups. The pastor is in a support group where he shares his own pain and struggles. But in this church they recognize that some people are so dysfunctional they would disrupt a group if they got into it. So there is a special group for them – recognizing that they need that extra touch of love and grace! I'm not sure how any church can pull this off, but what a cool thing!

God wants the Church to be a safe place where we can feel free to talk about our inward hurts and hangups and struggles and still be accepted and cared for. We've all got hurts and hangups – in some ways we are all dysfunctional. It's just that some of us are aware of it, and others aren't.

Matthew continues with the story of Joseph and Mary: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife" (Matthew 1:24). I don't believe Joseph instantly got over all of his doubts. But in spite of any ongoing uncertainty, Joseph did what the angel told him to do. And in doing this Joseph played a role in the most significant birth the world's ever known: the birth of our Savior! *God wants to take the pain and brokenness that we experience, and not only heal it, but use it for His good purposes!*

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