

We have heard throughout the gospels and the epistles that following Jesus can get you in real trouble. We've heard this from Jesus himself, we've heard this from Paul, and there are other places we can find this truth. And it is truth. Mary and Joseph found this out even before Jesus was born.

Mary was in deep trouble having a child out of wedlock. But today let's focus on Joseph.

Joseph was a good man. Matthew tells us this, and Joseph's behavior bears it out. There were a lot of responses that were socially acceptable when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. Joseph didn't throw a tantrum or publicly humiliate Mary. He made a choice to call off the wedding and move on. This was the kindest option open to him.

But then an angel visited Joseph and told him to stay with Mary as her husband. The angel told him what to name the child, which is basically telling Joseph to accept both Mary and the child. So this is what Joseph did.

Remember that I just said that there were a lot of socially acceptable responses Joseph could choose after discovering his fiancée was unexpectedly pregnant. Marrying her and accepting the child was NOT one of those socially acceptable responses.

Part of the reason this wasn't socially acceptable was because legitimate children are an important part of property rights in the system of inheritance in the ancient middle east. Legitimate children are one of the foundations of the entire economy in the ancient middle east. We're used to individual rights and private property, but these concepts didn't exist when Jesus was born. A single illegitimate child could foul up the inheritance of multiple extended families for generations. And that's just one of the problems Joseph faced when he obeyed God's angel.

So now we can see that it was socially risky when Joseph became Mary's husband and accepted Jesus as his own child. In a backwater town like Nazareth, it might have even been dangerous.

Why did God bring his only child into the world in this way? It didn't have to be this way, right? Well, maybe it did. God's wisdom is way better than ours. Mary and Joseph knew this about God's wisdom. God's wisdom is way better than the world's wisdom, and by walking in faith, Mary and Joseph brought God's own light into the world.

We also have faith in God and his wisdom. And when we walk in faith in the face of suffering and confusion like Mary and Joseph did, we also shine God's light in the world's darkness.

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Jesus began saving the world even before he was born, and the consequences of choosing Jesus show up immediately in the lives of Joseph and Mary. The consequences of choosing Jesus showed up for his followers during his life and after his ascension.

Choosing Jesus includes a radical change of life, deep healing, love among the most diverse of peoples, faith in the face of suffering, and joy. Joyful life change, joyful healing, joyful corporate love, and joyful suffering.

Joseph chose Jesus. We don't know what kind of trouble that got him into, but it was probably at least a bit of trouble.

Later, Paul chose Jesus. Paul chose Jesus joyfully every moment of every day, knowing full well just how dangerous it was to do so. Knowing full well how many enemies he had because of that choice, and how dangerous those enemies were. Because Paul used to be one.

Followers in the early Church were brutalized by persecutions. Persecutions they faced joyfully because they chose Jesus. Saints throughout the ages struggled with the world in a million different ways, but found joy in Jesus.

Jesus began saving the world even before he was born, but he's not finished saving it yet. Jesus came into the world in a context of conflict with social tradition and cultural authorities, and he left the world in the same way.

When we choose Jesus, we're asked to do the same. We're asked to be our faulty but faithful selves in the face of social rejection and cultural apathy. We're called to live choosing Jesus every hour of every day with joy in the face of suffering. This is one way we shine holy light in the darkness of the world. And holy light shines because we choose Jesus, not because we're so awesome.

Joseph chose Jesus amid some difficulties but also as a loving father. Because of this, the child Jesus grew.

The disciples chose Jesus. They suffered sorrow, yes, but their joy spills through every word of the gospels. Because of this, the faithful grew.

Paul chose Jesus. Paul was put through the wringer, but he was so full of joy. Because of this, the Church grew.

Millions of faithful Christians, saints and martyrs chose Jesus. Their lives were often full of pain, but because of their joy and faith, the Church grew to fill the entire world.

And because of all these faithful over all these generations, most of our ancestors chose Jesus. And because they chose Jesus, we are here today.

We have chosen Jesus. Sometimes following Jesus and loving each other has broken our hearts a little bit. I think we're in good company. I think we can expect choosing Jesus every hour of every day in an age of space travel and gene therapy and quantum computing and a constant barrage of pop-psychology... yes, I think choosing Jesus in the face of the modern world might bring a bit of suffering to our lives. It's not socially acceptable, and we face some consequences for choosing Jesus in this day and age. But we choose him joyfully.

Let's not forget joy.

In a few short days, we will ring out our joy. God has come to live among us. Emmanuel is born. God is with us. The Holy One of Israel. The one we chose. The one we continually choose. The one we choose with joy.

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Advent can be a difficult time of year. Our joy and faith can shine light in the darkness of the world, but it is up to us to make sure that light is not dimmed. There are a thousand things that can dim our light during Advent.

We can get frustrated with the commercialization of our holy season. We can mourn that we live in a world now where our holy season isn't the same as other people's. We can even become annoyed that other Christians insist on calling it all Christmas when it's really Advent.

It's important to not let the discomfort of rapid social change bleed into feelings of ongoing resentment and grief. It's important not to dim the light of Christ within us. It's important not to lose our joy.

Let's hold onto joy just as tightly as we hold onto Jesus. God has come to live among us!

Jesus began saving the world even before he was born, and he's not finished saving it yet. This is joyful news.

Hold onto joy. Hold onto joy until the entire world is filled with Christ's light shining through us.

Hold on. Just a few more days. God is entering the world and the world's darkness can never dim His light.

On that day, we will shine our joy in the world as we sing, all of us, at the top of our lungs, Joy to the World, the Lord is come.

Amen.