

Read also Isaiah 11:1-9. Check out the service, which is recorded on www.fpcd.org.

Thank you, Jim Stahl, for telling the story. (Matthew 1:18-25, The Birth of Jesus)
What impacts you as you heard the story?

Is it the fact that Joseph wanted to do the right thing when he found his betrothed pregnant?
Is it the grace of Joseph who didn't want to publicly disgrace Mary?
Is it the miraculous acts of the angel and of the Holy Spirit?
Is it Joseph's obedience once he received directions from the angel?
Is it the superintendence of God over all these affairs?

It is rare today to say, "That man is righteous" and regard it highly.

When is the last time you read about the wonderful righteousness of a believer? Or do you more likely expect to hear of a pastor's infidelity? Or, to hear co-workers or classmates make fun of a "goody two shoes" or "holier than thou."

Stories that point to "how good is he" and how "bad is everyone else" usually aren't that popular.

But Matthew tells the story and you might even call Joseph holy. He finds out his bride-to-be is pregnant – but he's unwilling to shame her. He doesn't want to be with her, but he's unwilling for others to learn of her secret. He listens to an angel's instructions and follows without question. He marries Mary but stays celibate until after the baby is born.

He borders on sainthood.

Matthew, the writer, is a theologian. He's teaching us about God. All the details are important. He calls Joseph righteous. What do you know about righteousness?

Most people probably would not claim personal righteousness. And if someone did, we probably would not like them. So let's think about righteousness from God's perspective. Perhaps if we understood it, we might learn something useful.

Consider this verse: (READ Mt 1:19) "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

Notice that Joseph's righteousness has a clear element of grace. He was unwilling to disgrace her.

If you think of a righteous person do you think of them as grace filled? Joseph's attitude toward potential adultery (engagement at that time was as legally binding as marriage) was not only merciful but even protective of her.

Think how it would be today. You are engaged. You are both committed to staying pure, but she turns up pregnant. Is the first thing on your mind protecting her reputation?

That's why Joseph was called righteous.

Mary hadn't done anything wrong but Joseph didn't know that. Yes, he held her accountable by deciding not to go through with the marriage. But he still treated her with grace.

There's a proverb that means a lot to me: "*Lord, make my words sweet and tender for tomorrow I may have to eat them.*" Have you ever jumped down someone's throat for something only to find out later you were totally wrong? Then you know why I like that saying.

My mother used to rent out a bedroom in her house to women who needed a place to stay. She had a special vase that graced a particular place in her living room. After one such woman moved out, the vase disappeared. She (and I) were sure the vase had been stolen, and we talked about it to each other, and to friends. My mom questioned the woman. Let's just say we were not quiet about our suspicions.

Then one day, my mother noticed a rather familiar looking vase – oh yes, there it was, on another shelf. And her daughter realized that in rearranging furniture perhaps *she* had placed the vase in the "wrong" place, causing it to be overlooked. "*Lord, make my words sweet and tender for tomorrow I may have to eat them.*"

Joseph didn't yell and protest and draw public attention to Mary's "sin" which turned out not to be sin at all. He did not have to eat his words.

Joseph's gracious righteousness reflects the spirit of the Old Testament. Isaiah writes about God's holy way:

- It's a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, a Spirit of counsel and might, a Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."
- "The Lord will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay."
- The result will be peace.

So God's holy way is not a black and white thing, but rather one of truth with mercy, which leads to peace.

Do you think of God as "truth with mercy?" Do you approach someone who does something wrong with that kind of spirit? When you do, your righteousness becomes redemptive because it holds people accountable, yet gives them hope and peace.

There's a second element in this passage about Joseph's righteousness. Joseph had faith. Do you think of faith as righteousness? The angel told Joseph what to do and Joseph obeyed everything he said. God counts faith as righteousness. Remember Abraham?

"He believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

When Joseph believed the angel, that was faith. That was righteousness in God's eyes. And Joseph got to be used for this amazing miracle:

- Jesus' lineage through King David was fulfilled because of Joseph.
- Joseph got to name Jesus, which identifies His mission of Savior, "for he will save his people from their sins." Not them. We cannot save ourselves; only He. It's a profound moral reality.

When you live by faith it makes a huge difference. God uses you in His work. If you just reduce your faith to a list of rules, trying to redeem yourself instead of responding in obedience to a person, you miss being blessed and used by God.

Joseph could have said, "I'll have nothing to do with this. I have my integrity, you know." But he didn't. He had grace, and faith, and was blessed.

So how does righteousness in this way work out in real life? I'd like to tell you a story of a man named Jean Valjean. You may know his story, which was written by Victor Hugo.¹ It takes place in 19th century France.

Jean Valjean was a thief, released after nineteen years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread. The sentence had been five years, but he kept trying to escape. Jail-life hardened him until he cared about nothing.

He sought food and shelter but people repeatedly treat him with contempt, even though he had money to pay. But a kind soul suggested he go to Bishop Myriel.

Bishop Myriel was the son of a Parliament member, but rather than follow in the footsteps of his father, he followed his heart's desire to serve God. Upon appointment as bishop, he donated his palace to be used as a hospital. Over the years he gave away vast amounts of his possessions to help the poor.

Jean Valjean knocked on his door and introduced himself as an ex-convict recently released from prison. To his surprise the Bishop welcomed him warmly, shared his supper, and offered him a bed for the night. Jean was moved deeply. But then hardheartedly he rose in the middle of the night, snuck into the bishop's bedroom, and stole his host's silverware.

The police caught him and brought him and the silverware back to the bishop. Punishment will be life in prison. But the bishop knows something about righteousness. As Jean faces him, Bishop Myriel pretends he gave the silverware to Jean as a gift. He even offers his candlesticks to Jean – the last objects of value he owns.

Released by the police, he prepares to leave. The bishop looks him in the eye and says, "Don't forget, you promised me to use this silver to become an honest man."

But Jean's conversion is not complete. Finding a chimney sweep on a deserted road, he steals a coin from him. But suddenly he realizes what he has done. Guilt over the depth of his corruption sweeps over him and he remorsefully resolves to amend his life. Right then and there, he gives his life to God.

In order to make a new start Jean Valjean assumes a new name and moves to a new town, and starts a factory. This brings prosperity to the town. He has such a reputation for generosity, for

¹Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*, 1862.

dealing with his employees as if they were family, and for running his business efficiently that he is elected mayor of the town.

He offers a job to a young woman with an illegitimate child, whose hopes for marriage were dashed when the father abandons them. This was not done in those days. Later when the mother dies, he rescues the child and raises her himself.

His lifestyle becomes one of righteousness according to God's Holy way. He looks at people not through the lens of their questionable past but on the hope of offering change for the future. Honesty and generosity mark the man who lives now to help others have a chance at life, even though it often costs him greatly.

So one righteous person offers grace to someone else – hope for a better future – saying “use this silver to become an honest man.” And then that person uses his righteousness to extend mercy to his employees and generosity to a little girl. It goes on and on, changing lives, giving a future and giving hope.

In God's eyes, righteousness in a man or woman is not just for doing right or good for goodness' sake. Righteousness has a much greater purpose that leads others to the hope of redemption. That's God's holy way.

What about you? Are you righteous according to God's holy way? Do you offer grace to those who wrong you? Do you act in faith, trusting that God is at work in your life with great purpose? If so you will be blessed, and you will bring great hope to others, just like Joseph.

Abound in hope this season. And may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.

AMEN