

12-15-2007

Advent Devotional "Joseph's Choice"

S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "Advent Devotional "Joseph's Choice"" (2007). *Creative Works*. 45.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/45

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Advent Devotional
December 15, 2007
Joseph's Choice
Matthew 1:18-23

Matthew mentions a betrothal, but only in passing, only as backdrop to the real beginning of the birth story. He begins the story of Jesus as he ends it—in betrayal. The chosen ones, Mary and Judas, betray the choosers, the lovers. In so doing, Matthew begins and ends his story on a most human note, with the interaction that seems most to trouble most humans.

Look closely at this first scene. Matthew passively tells us that Mary was found to be with child. Questions immediately circle the story like flies: who discovered it; how; how far along was she; who told Joseph; and what did that person tell him? Matthew has no account of Mary's angelic visitor; he focuses on the man. In a patriarchal culture driven by honor, what will the man do? What figure would the Child have as an earthly stand-in for His true Father?

All that I'm about to say is speculation, for I speak of inferences in places that Matthew is silent. But hear me out before you decide.

Luke says that Gabriel comes to Mary with a fantastic message: you're going to have a baby. When the angel reveals that her cousin Elizabeth is also to have a child (in three months), Mary immediately leaves for a visit. After Elizabeth bears John, Mary returns home—three months pregnant, though her clothing would certainly disguise any early "showing." As a dutiful daughter, Mary certainly told her parents but

equally certainly did not tell Joseph. Text and culture make that unlikely, for all proper communication with her fiance would have taken place through a “friend of the bridegroom” deputed for that purpose. Her father, duty-bound, would have let the husband arranged for his daughter know of the changed circumstances. So Joseph probably learned the situation three months into the pregnancy, and probably directly from Mary’s father.

Although Mary is young, Joseph almost certainly is not. He is probably established in the community, already a carpenter with enough skill and trade to support a wife. He has his pride, and he has his position, so he has much to lose. The text calls him a righteous man, so he is observant—and probably devout. He knows that the situation is fraught with peril. While custom allows divorce for almost any cause the husband fancies, Joseph knows that the law recognizes only one reason: adultery. He further knows that the penalty for adultery is death. Exposing her means that she will die. If he has heard her complete story, then he knows that she will be stoned for blasphemy. He also realizes that his reputation will suffer, along with his vanity. What older man wants to be cuckolded by a younger woman? Further, if he marries her and she has a son, that son of unknown (but certainly not his) paternity will become his heir and perpetuate his family name.

Scripture hints that Joseph settles on a humane middle course. He will not expose her, but neither will he accept the child. He will send her away, perhaps back to Elizabeth, to have and dispose of the child, then return and pick up where things left off as if nothing has happened. In due time they may marry: both families

will retain their honor, and he will act as if this little “problem” never occurred. Joseph is going beyond the law’s requirement, acting as his ancestor David, the man after God’s own heart, would have acted in his best moments. He is exhibiting the best possible human response to betrayal.

But, as Isaiah records, God isn’t satisfied with the best possible human response: “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD.” (Isaiah 55:8, NASB) While Joseph’s choice is good, rational, and very humane, God has something else in mind. After counseling him (as He did Mary) “don’t be afraid,” God confirms that Mary is carrying a son and requests (not commands) that Joseph “adopt” him. As a righteous man, Joseph knows that adoption means that he won’t be able to disown that son. God asks Joseph to do something truly difficult: to go beyond even the best of human responses to betrayal by forgiving and forgetting what has happened and choosing unilaterally to trust again. He makes Joseph’s choice the same as the one the unborn child will face in the Garden, when that Son admits that He doesn’t want to face the cross, but confesses that His will is to do the Father’s will.

Matthew bookends his narrative of the Savior’s life with vignettes of betrayal and forgiveness, selfishness and sacrifice. He foreshadows the end at the beginning. But most of all, he uses Joseph’s choice to put in stark relief the question that runs throughout his Gospel, the question asked of Joseph, Judas, Jesus, and those encountered along the way: am I willing to do what God asks, whatever it may be? Will I obey, or betray?

Ray Granada