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Matthew 1:18-25

“Intrude” Series: Joseph

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

Should I wear the gray shirt to church, or the blue shirt? Should I sit in the same pew I always sit in, or should I try sitting in a different, scary pew? Should we go out to eat after church tonight, or eat at home? Should I order the grilled chicken, or the nachos?

Life is a sequence of events about which you have to make many decisions. Some of us thrive on decision-making. Some of us are horrible at it. When you're indecisive, people can think you're just flaky. When you're too decisive, people can think you're overbearing.

One of the perks and problems of being the Senior Pastor in a busy church like this is that I end up making a lot of decisions. When other members of the church staff face a challenging decision, sometimes they put the monkey on my back. Sometimes I hand that monkey right back to them. Particularly with our young DCE's, I will occasionally say, "It's your decision." But then I always add, "But use good judgment. Think through the potential outcomes of your decision. Consider the impact of your decision not just on yourself, but on others. And before you make that decision, pray about it."

Decisions are a significant part of our lives, right? And the way we go about making decisions can be even more significant.

In our Bible story tonight, Joseph the carpenter wrestles with a huge decision. He's found a woman to spend his life with. She's great, she's awesome. But she's with child. Mary's pregnant, and Joseph knows he's not the father.

See, in those days, a Jewish couple like Joseph and Mary would first be betrothed. Betrothal was a solemn promise before witnesses, in which they both vowed to be faithful. Once betrothed, they were legally married. But the Jewish custom was that there would be an interval of time between the betrothal ceremony and the bringing home of the bride to the husband's house. And it was during this interval – while they were legally married but not yet living together – Joseph learns that his bride is expecting a child. Again, not his child. This is a disaster for him, a calamity. What should Joseph do?

He doesn't know, yet, that Mary is still a virgin, and that her baby is the Son of God. So Joseph is left with two choices, in his mind. He can make the harsher decision: to charge Mary with adultery, to make a public example of her, to let her face the consequences. Or, he can make the gentler decision: to make use of the lax divorce laws of the Jews, to not charge Mary with any crime, to just quietly give her a letter of divorce.

I can only imagine how difficult this was decision for Joseph. In his moments of anger, feeling betrayal, he probably felt like putting the hammer down on Mary. But, in the end, after thinking it all through, considering the impact of his decision on everybody, he decides to divorce Mary quietly.

But before Joseph is able to carry out his decision, something momentous occurs. God intervenes, intrudes. The Lord sends an angel from heaven, who tells Joseph, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The angel reveals the shocking, miraculous reality of Mary's pregnancy. She hasn't been unfaithful to Joseph after all. She's humbly yielding to God, allowing his plans to be fulfilled through her. And now, thanks to God's intervention, Joseph decides to do the same. He consents. He obeys. "He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but he knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."

Way to go, Joseph! Good decision, Joseph! Now, how can we do the same? How can we make better decisions, more consistently God-pleasing choices?

Well, if God would intervene directly in our lives, like he did with Joseph, that would help. If God sent an angel every time I had to make a choice, I bet I'd make far less foolish choices. But those direct, overt interventions are rare, aren't they?

So many Christians end up assuming, falsely, that God never intervenes, that God never wishes to steer our decisions. But he does. Remember, first, that our God has super-high expectations for the choices his people make every day – the little ones and the big ones. So don't act as if you're not accountable to God, for all your choices. You are.

But remember, next, that God has already intervened in the biggest, most important way of all. He sent his Son, to be born in our human flesh. Jesus lived our human life, faced all our tempting, difficult choices; and then he gave up his holy, perfect, sinless life on the cross. Christ died to forgive us; but also to renew and change us. Sinners like us who believe in Jesus are cleansed of our sins, and then we're empowered by God to live more godly lives, to make more God-pleasing choices.

Let me leave you tonight with three questions to ask yourself, as a Christian, when you have an everyday decision, a choice in your life, to make. The questions are designed to bring God and the help only he can give – the help we so desperately need – into our decision-making process. The questions are printed on the bottom of page 3 in your bulletin, and maybe you'll find them useful.

First, ask yourself, **is this a decision about which God cares deeply?** If it's grilled chicken versus nachos, or Il Baccio versus Golden Corral, you don't need to seek God's counsel. I'm pretty sure God doesn't care deeply about your dinner tonight. But if it's a parenting decision, a marriage decision, a moral decision, you need to bring God into the picture on these decisions.

Second, ask yourself, before you decide, **has God already spoken on this matter?** What does the Bible say? What do the Ten Commandments say? What does Jesus say, in the New Testament? If God's already spoken on the matter you're trying to decide, then you know what you should do.

And third, ask yourself, **do I truly believe in my Christian heart that God will bless my decision?** If the Lord doesn't directly intervene in your decision, like he did with Joseph, then he's giving you the choice. But he still expects you to use good judgment, to respect his wishes, to give him glory by the way you live your life every day, every hour. So be responsible, in your choices. Think it through, and search your heart as a Christian, so that God's become your ways more and more.

In the end, it's only by knowing God's grace, by believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that we can live a Christian, God-pleasing life. But God has blessed you with the gift of a Savior, a forgiving Savior. Receive this gift in faith tonight. And then trust God throughout the week to bless you, and all your decisions. Amen.

