

Angela Pound

Advent / Love

Joseph loves mary

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We all have to make decisions in our life, in fact everyday. What are we going to have for breakfast, what are we going to wear. Some are more lasting or have more impact than others. What career path are we going to take? Who or if we are going to seek someone to love for the rest of our life as a spouse? Within the marriage relationship there are many decisions made out of love.

You ready for some pictures? (Go to the first slide) 20 years ago this coming May, Mark proposed. Yeah, there's a story to this picture, which I'll tell you about some day, but the short answer is, he proposed during the Apple Blossom's Queen's Ball and if you couldn't guess it, I said yes! lol. Gosh, so young and sleep filled nights! (Go to the next slide)

A little over a year later we got married, surrounded by many family and friends. While we wrote our own vows, we swore an oath to each other and in front of God, that we would love each other, that we would bring our separate

lives together as one, throughout the good times and the bad. And there have been both of those times. While many other couples in this world have experienced way more heartache and loss than we have, we have been with each other through the thick and thin. Sometimes being more loving towards each other than other times, if I can be perfectly honest, and I'm sure you would say the same thing in your relationship if you were being honest. We're not perfect, but I can honestly say our love has grown more for each other, the more we have gone through things with each other. And we have had to make sacrifices and lots of decisions throughout our marriage, for our love. I had to get used to a fire pager going off in the middle of the night. The first few times, months, probably years, it would scare me awake. My heart would be racing, and I struggled to go back to sleep, sometimes finally falling asleep for him to get home, crawl back in bed, and potentially for the pager to go off again. Now, 18 years later, I usually sleep right through them.

It is in our love for each other and our children that we have shared traditions as a family. Some of which we continued from our childhood that we now do together, some from the past that we have had to let go as people have moved on, or new ones we have created. Such as, we do a fondue every Christmas eve late into the evening with my parents just as I did as a kid, and now these last for

years as the kids are old enough to stay awake for it, they talk about how fun the evening is together. Or we used to drive to Mark's grandparents in Old Barns every Boxing Day when they were alive, for a large family gathering. I remember singing Christmas carols by the old piano, or the large amount of food we would intake with everyone finding a spot to be in their home, or in the last few years we now sneak away to a cabin in the middle of the woods right after Christmas for a couple of nights, just the four of us and the dog for some time away from cell service and screens, to be as a family, reading, playing our new board and card games we got for Christmas, and hiking through the woods. The kids talk about this trip a lot, as it's an opportunity of uninterrupted time for the four of us. These are some of our family traditions around Christmas.

I look back at that picture of us on our wedding day and we had no idea what life had in store for us, and I am so thankful that God has been with us every step of the way, and God says, fear not, I am with you, don't ever forget your love for me and each other.

And sometimes we need to go against traditions or societal norms, to express our love.

The scripture read today, Matthew 1:18-25, is the third narrative we've looked at this Advent season where an angel has appeared to a biblical character and said, Do Not Be Afraid, or Fear Not.

Mary has already received the news, life-changing news. She already had an angel appear to her and say, Do Not Be Afraid.

Matthew is the only gospel to contain this story of Joseph. The author of Matthew wrote for a primarily Jewish audience, so it was important to establish Jesus as Jewish with a righteous Jewish dad, Joseph. While Matthew's Gospel seems to come often from a Jewish point of view, it is also the Gospel most critical of some Jewish customs and traditions, particularly of the scribes and Pharisees, those at the top of the religious hierarchy. Matthew's Gospel demonstrates that there is a way to be faithful to God while also challenging the institutions in which humans try to contain God. There is a place for tradition. But there is also a time and a place for letting go of ancient law and custom and discerning what new thing God might be doing in the present moment. If Joseph was more bound by tradition, things definitely wouldn't have looked the same as Scripture says surrounding Jesus' birth.

Matthew 1:18 states "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

Marriage was a two-step, contractual process then. Betrothal lasted for a year, after which the couple formally cohabited. Sexual relations did not occur until the second

stage. Betrothal involved a financial agreement between families. In conserved Galilean families the couple could not be together alone before the wedding, so Joseph may not have known Mary very well.

Matthew 1:19 “Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”

That is the NRSV version, the NIV version brings up the law.

Matthew 1:19 (NIV) 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.

What is this law? The law from Deuteronomy, which could be 24:1 “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house”

Betrothal's were more binding than modern Western engagements as we know them. A betrothal could only end by divorce or by death of one of the partners. Sexual unfaithfulness was grounds for divorce throughout the ancient world; both law and custom in fact required a man to divorce an unfaithful wife or fiancée, A Jewish man who divorced a faithful wife had to refund the money she brought into the marriage (normally a gift from her father),

but in the case of an unfaithful wife, however, the husband could keep this money, plus he was entitled to a refund of any money he may have paid the father as a bride price. Paying the father was the traditional Israelite custom, the father giving his daughter a monetary gift was a more recent but now widespread custom. Joseph might therefore have profited financially by divorcing Mary in front of elders, in a court setting. Instead, sensitive to her shame, he prefers a private divorce. A private divorce meant giving her a certificate of divorce, which would specify her freedom to marry someone else, in front of two or three witnesses. His decision to call off their engagement is viewed as an act of kindness and he is therefore regarded as righteous. I also believe that not only did this show sensitivity to her shame, but also that he loved her.

Joseph's dilemma was a real one. The cultural and religious expectations at the time would have pressured Joseph to distance himself from her, to break off their engagement, and to preserve his honor. He was caught between his devotion to tradition and his desire to act out of love, compassion, and mercy.

Joseph then has a dream that changes everything. Except for the dream of the Magi and that of Pilate's wife, all dreamvisions are given to Joseph in Matthew.

So, God quickly changes Joseph's plan. The angel explains

to Joseph that Mary has not been unfaithful and that her child has been born of the Holy Spirit. He reminds Joseph of his messianic lineage by calling him “son of David.” He commands Joseph not only to not divorce Mary but to go ahead and marry her. The child will then legally be Joseph’s son and thus legally son of David.

Joseph is told not to be afraid, not because the situation isn’t frightening, but because God is at work in a mysterious way. His natural fears about public disgrace, family expectations, and the challenges of raising the Messiah are valid, yet God reassures him that He is in control. This divine assurance calls Joseph to faith and courage in the face of uncertainty.

As Erin Wathen puts it, “What the angel suggests is no small thing. The messenger essentially tells Joseph to put aside everything he knows - about culture and custom, about love and fidelity, about family and gender roles and power. It’s an impossible request. But the angel speaks: do not be afraid. And as we’ve noticed by now, those four little words can accomplish the impossible.”

An angel from God convinced Joseph in a dream not to follow the law. Joseph didn’t let his fears stand in his way. Despite what the law, what tradition said, he expressed his love for God and Mary through his actions. It was a deep, self-sacrificial love. His love for Mary and his love and obedience to God’s will show that his commitment is not

based on societal expectations, but on a higher calling. He listens to God and trusts that God's plan is greater than his own understanding or fears. He could have chosen to uphold the tradition of punishing Mary, but instead, he acts with compassion and mercy. This decision reflects a tension between the traditional expectations and the new revelation he receives from God, which changes his understanding of what's truly important. Joseph chose mercy over judgment, understanding over condemnation. Joseph's decision to quietly break off the engagement was already a reflection of love, but his ultimate choice to obey the angel's command, the word from God, took him deeper into the realm of unconditional love—where obedience to God trumps even cultural expectations.

His decision to embrace God's plan, despite the cultural and personal challenges, reflects a love that transcends tradition. He demonstrates a deep trust in God's provision. And in the message “Do not be afraid,” Joseph exemplifies the kind of courage that comes when we follow God's leading, even when it takes us out of our comfort zones or forces us to reconsider what we thought we knew. In our own lives, we can find ourselves at crossroads where we must choose between upholding tradition or acting out of love. The world may tell us to uphold traditions or norms that maintain order, but God often calls us to something deeper—obedience to His will, which may look radically

different from what society expects.

Thankfully there are people in our societal past who chose to go against tradition or norms.

Women's suffrage groups were first established in the 1870s in Toronto, led by activists such as Dr. Emily Stowe. Other groups soon formed and created alliances with international organizations, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In the early 20th century, long-held ideas about women's role in public life began to shift. In 1918, Parliament passed a law removing the gender barrier to voting and gave many Canadian women the right to vote. This did not mean that all women had the right to vote, though. Exclusions remained—not on the basis of gender, but for other reasons, such as race. The struggle for women's equality did not end in 1918, as many women continued to be denied the right to vote. Women in Quebec obtained the provincial vote in 1940, and First Nations women were excluded from the federal vote until 1960. Today, women are prominent in Canadian political life, yet they are still underrepresented in the House of Commons and face obstacles to full participation in the democratic process. But if it weren't for people like Dr. Emily Stowe, women might still not have the right to vote.

There are individuals who have fought and led the way, and continue to do so so that women can be recognized as leaders within ministry. While I have been asked the

question this fall if or how have I seen the prejudice surrounding women in ministry, I thankfully can say I don't see it often, but I have see it. In one instance I have been asked how I could become a minister and handle the duties with having children at home, as to which I point out, is this a question you would ask of my male counterpart? This is God's call on my life and I need to follow His direction. Or I was told during my ministry license interview by an individual that I should expect at least three years after I graduate from my degree before I would find a ministry job compared to my male counterparts, and that most likely it would remain in youth ministry. Thankfully things didn't follow the quote on quote normal trajectory.

Joseph's actions were an embodiment of what it means to love beyond tradition. He chose to love Mary not because of what was expected, but because of what God had asked of him. We are called to love beyond what is easy, comfortable, or traditional. God loved us so much that he went against tradition sending his only Son, in the form a baby, to live with us, to be the ultimate example of love. Jesus, who came into the world to save us from sin, broke many traditions and religious rules of the time and He calls us to love our neighbors, our families, and even our enemies. Love is not about following the cultural script; it's about listening to God's voice and acting in obedience, even when it's difficult or confusing. Love isn't always easy.

Are we more concerned with tradition and social expectations, or are we willing to follow the path of love, even when it leads us into unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory? Like Joseph, we are called to trust in God's guidance and choose the way of love, even when it requires us to set aside our personal plans and cultural norms. Fear drives us to do (or not do) things, often keeping with tradition. And while that's not always wrong by any means, sometimes we are called to part ways with tradition. May we all have the courage to follow Joseph's example, responding to God's call with faith, obedience, and a willingness to love radically, for the sake of the One who came to save us all—Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

But, in keeping up with traditions this year about Christmas carols, I'm going to finish with one last one. A true story from 1847 in a French village. A local priest asked the local wine commissioner, Placide Cappeau, to write a poem for Christmas mass. Cappeau opened to the book of Luke and put himself into the wonder of that night. He imagined all the emotions and miracles he might have seen. His poem "Cantique De Noel" was penned. Cappeau was so pleased with its outcome, he asked a highly educated musician friend of his, who was also a Jew, to write music to accompany the poem. His friend Adolphe Charles Adams agreed. The song was performed at Christmas mass and the French village immediately

embraced it. However, years later upon discovering the lyricist was a worldly man (and now a well-known socialist) and that the composer was a Jew, the church banned the beloved Christmas song. Parishioners continued to sing it in their own homes behind closed doors. Several decades later in America John Sullivan Dwight discovered “Cantique De Noel”. A fiery abolitionist, Dwight fell in love with the song, especially the message of freedom. “*The Redeemer has broken every bond/ The Earth is free, and Heaven is open/ He sees a brother where there was only a slave/ Love unites those that iron had chained...*” Dwight published a rewritten version of the carol in his own magazine and it was embraced by a shattered nation— particular among the North as the Civil War began to break the country apart.

The carol seems to have a long history of uniting those in war. During the Franco-Prussian War, legend says that during a lull in the fighting, a French soldier stood up from his muddy trench with no weapon in hand and began singing “Cantique de Noel”. Upon hearing the beautiful rendering, the German soldiers were so moved, they began singing as well. Both sides lifted their voice in song, alternating between French carols and the hymns of Martin Luther. A Christmas truce of sorts had been declared. Truth or not, the legend teaches us that hate cannot stand in the presence of love.

So, this Christmas and beyond, are the things you do (or not do) because of tradition or out of love? Always choose love. Let us sing this song proclaiming God's love. O Holy Night.