

**Chaos or Christ:
Dreams Which Calm our Fears**
Matthew 1:18-25

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Author Scott Peck opens one of his most popular books with these three simple words: LIFE IS DIFFICULT. “If we can embrace that truth,” continues Peck, “life will no longer be difficult.” I’d like to talk about that for a few moments this morning.

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, there are no angels singing, no shepherds watching, no cattle lowing, no tiny babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger.

In verse 18, Matthew says 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.” Watch for it on the next Jerry Springer show or read about it in tomorrow’s *Enquirer*.

In order to fully appreciate the dilemma that Matthew presents us, maybe we need to know a little bit about Middle Eastern customs. Far too often in our day, couples meet by chance, have sex for fun, live together for convenience, and marry, if they determine they can get along together in the long run. That’s not the way it was in Jesus’ day. Parents arranged engagements, which evolved into a yearlong betrothal where couples were legally man and wife, but neither lived together nor slept together, in order that they could get fully acquainted with one another. Then, and only then, was the marriage celebrated and completely consummated. Divorce was the only way to break a betrothal. Adultery was punishable by death. So Mary says to Joseph, “We need to talk! We have a problem.”

When life is difficult what can we do? Can we find a clue here from the private life of Joseph that might turn our lives from chaos to Christ this Christmas? I propose that we can.

WHEN LIFE IS DIFFICULT, BE FAIR.

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

Joseph was a righteous man. *Dikaois* is the word. It means just, honest, honorable, upright. Joseph lived by the rules. He never drove his donkey faster than the speed limit. He did not cheat on his taxes and he never skipped a census. When he built something for somebody, it was built extremely well. Joseph was a righteous, just man. This verse also tells us that Joseph was a considerate, caring, and compassionate man. He felt no need to announce Mary’s

pregnancy in the town square. He never asked the synagogue members to remember her in prayer. He resolves to deal with this matter like he has lived his life--quietly and simply. When justice meets compassion, you have fairness. That's what fairness is all about.

If you want to know the ethical thing to do in difficult situations, ask the question, "Is it fair to all concerned?" That is a pretty good rule for life. You see, fairness is the fundamental thing we expect from one another. It applies to every game of life. It is true in the marriage game; it is true in the family game, the business game, the government game. In every game we ought to try to play fair. Is that too much to ask in life?

The essence of fairness may be very difficult to explain. Yet, there are some things that fair people just do not do. Fair people do not take advantage of people in trouble. On the night of September 11th, there were a number of service stations that immediately started charging \$3--\$4 per gallon for gasoline. My daughter-in-law happened to drive into such a place in the Louisville area. She bought some gasoline and then proceeded to the owner and said, "I'm reporting you for price gouging because what you have done is unfair." My daughter-in-law is an aggressive person, but she was right. All of us would say something is wrong about that.

Fair people do not do that sort of thing. Fair people do not take advantage of somebody when they are in trouble. Fair people do not charge unreasonable interest rates to poor people. Fair people do not ignore minorities when they seek to be served in a restaurant. Fair people do not do things like that.

Fair people do not blame others for their problems. Scott Peck, in discussing our need to take personal responsibility for our problems, tells about interviewing an Army career sergeant in Okinawa who had a drinking problem.

Why do you drink so much?

Well, what else is there to do at night in Okinawa except to drink?

Do you like to read?

I love to read, but it's too noisy in the barracks and too far away to walk to the library.

Is the library further than the bar?

Well, I really don't like to read that much.

Do you like to fish?

I love to fish, but the problem is I don't have anybody to fish with over here.

What if I put you in touch with some guys who fish all the time?

Well, I really don't like to fish that much.

So, what you are trying to say to me is that you would rather drink than fish or read and it has nothing to do with being in Okinawa. End of interview.

There are some things missing in this narrative [in Mathew] that I expect to happen. I would have probably said, “Mary, why on earth are you doing this to me? I don’t deserve it.” I might have said, “Mary, you got yourself in this mess so you get yourself out of it.” But that is not what happens. Here is Joseph saying, “We’ve got a problem and we’ve got to solve it, because fair people play fair.” When life is difficult, be fair.

There is another thing we learn from this ancient story of Joseph’s struggle in the night.

WHEN LIFE IS DIFFICULT, BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES. Verse 20: But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, *Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.* The angel goes on to explain that He will be called Emmanuel and Jesus because He will become the Savior of the world.

When it is difficult, we need to know that things are not always what they sometimes seem to be. When things are difficult, we need to know that we do not know everything about everything. When things are difficult, we need to know that today’s reality can leave us reeling from yesterday’s lack of reach. When things are difficult, we need to know that by looking really deep into a problem, we are likely to discover a possibility. Let me explain.

Concerned parents got this letter from their college student just before the holidays.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Sorry to be so long in writing but my paper was destroyed in the dormitory fire. It all started when some students were making crack in the basement. My burns were minor and the doctor says my eyesight will return soon. The wonderful boy who rescued me is kindly sharing his apartment with me. His name is Bill. He had to drop out of school but I love him all the same. In fact, you’ll be pleased to know that you will be grandparents in a few months. Love, Cheryl

P.S. Actually none of the above happened--no fire, no burns, no Bill, no pregnancy. However, I did get two D’s and one F this semester. I wanted you to keep the news in perspective when I get home for the holidays.

The Angel of the Lord had a different perspective on this problem. That night Joseph discovered in a dream something that he had known as a carpenter for a lifetime. It is a lot harder to stretch a board than it is to cut one down to size. *God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps on the seas and rides upon the storm.* When it comes to faith, don’t roll it out too flat. When it comes to faith, don’t try to make it fit too soon. When it comes to faith, don’t cut it short too quickly. God may have some things in mind that you have yet to dream. When life is difficult, be open to potential and possibilities.

When life is difficult, use your imagination. That is what a teacher said to her elementary students as she tried to teach them basic math. "I want you to use your imagination. If you had nine pieces of candy in this hand and seven pieces in this hand, how many pieces of candy would you have?" Bobby, with great confidence, replied, "I would have 14." "No", said the teacher, "nine plus seven equals 16." "But teacher," said Bobby, "you said use your imagination. I ate one piece and gave another piece to my brother so I have 14 pieces left in my hand." That may not get you through math class, but it will get you through life. Find in every moment, the possibilities that are yours. When life is difficult, stay open because God might be ready to do the most important thing he has ever wanted to do in your life.

WHEN LIFE IS DIFFICULT, BE FAITHFUL.

Verse 24: When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded and took her as his wife.

You know the saying, "Don't just stand there, do something." Have you ever said that? Joseph stands as a gigantic inversion of that principle. "Don't just do something, stand there." Who wants to be Joseph in the Christmas play? No lines to say, no songs to sing, never front and center stage. Just Joseph--dragging his wife off to a family census when she is nine months pregnant. Joseph does not even reserve a guest room for his pregnant wife. Nobody wants to be Joseph in the Christmas pageant. After all, Joseph does not do anything in this unfolding drama except to stand there. Let me remind you today what simply standing there did for the Son of God.

By Joseph simply standing there, Jesus had a home to lay his head. By simply standing there, Jesus had a heritage that linked him to the lineage of King David. By simply standing there, Jesus the Christ had an earthly father. When he wanted to teach us something about God in Heaven, he said you ought to pray like this, "Our Father who art in Heaven." By simply standing there, Jesus had illustrations of life flowing into the realities of faith. He told stories of wise men building houses on rocks and foolish people building houses on sand. If you are going to build a tower, you should first sit down and count the cost. He did not learn that in seminary because he never went to seminary. He learned it from his earthly father.

When life is difficult, be faithful. You may not always be right, but you can always be faithful. Perhaps the best thing that we could do today would be to just stand here for a moment and adore him, and lay our lives before him. You may not always be right, but you can always be faithful.

Jim and Phillip were best of friends. They grew up together, went to school together, and attended the same college. When the Big War came, they joined the military together. They wound up in Germany together fighting in some of

history's bloodiest battles. One day in a fierce fight, under heavy fire, their commanding officer ordered a retreat. As Jim ran for his life, he noticed Phillip was nowhere to be found. Panic stricken, Jim begged his commanding officer to let him go back into enemy fire to get his life-long buddy. His commanding officer denied his request. Jim went anyway. Soon, the platoon watched as Jim carried a limp soldier through the woods. His commanding officer was irate, furious. "Your friend was dead, there was nothing you could do", shouted his officer. "No, sir", said Jim, "you're wrong, sir. I got there just before he died. His last words to me were, 'I knew you would come. I knew you would come.' We may not always be right, but we can always be faithful.

So it is Christmas-time and even Christmas brings its fears and doubts; yet, I pray that somehow in an angel dream we will be set free from our fears and doubts to work and praise and believe. May the Christ of Christmas transform our chaos into a new creation. Let it be. Let it be.

Amen.

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