

Advent 4 Sermon  
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If I were to tell you all that during the time the biblical stories were written, both Jewish society and the cultures that surrounded them were deeply patriarchal, I'm assuming none of you would be surprised. These were times when gender norms were strictly enforced. If you were a man you were forced to work in order to care for yourself and your family, and if you were a woman you were forced to marry in order to find a man to take care of you, and the inevitable children you would have while married. There generally weren't a lot more options. If you were a man you couldn't stay home to take care of the kids, and if you were a woman you couldn't get an education to get a job and take care of yourself. That's just not how things were done. Though men and women were both limited in this way, in most ways men had a lot more freedom. They could generally abuse their wives and children without consequence, have extramarital affairs without consequence (as long as it was with women of a lower social status), and even have premarital partners. However, women were not allowed these freedoms. In fact, if a woman was found to not be pure before marriage, her chances at having a good life were greatly limited. Unless her father was willing to bear the shame of caring for an impure daughter the rest of her life, or was able to find a husband that was unaware of her transgressions or was of a low enough social status in comparison to the woman that he didn't care, the woman didn't have a lot of options open to her. She was unlikely to find a job to care for herself and thus likely to end up destitute.

And that leads us to the story of the birth of our savior. A young woman named Mary who was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph was visited by the angel Gabriel, and was told of God's plan for her to conceive and bear a son who would be the savior and redeemer of the world. Mary, knowing full well the fate that would likely await an unwed pregnant woman, agreed to follow God's plan for her. This would have taken an immense amount of bravery. Though Mary was young, she was not living in a cave. She would have known full-well what the consequences could be. If she was pregnant before marriage, she might be left to seek asylum with her father, or hope there would be another man who would wish to marry her in spite of her predicament. Or she could end up destitute. But even worse, Mary was engaged to Joseph. Because of this pledge, the consequences of her being pregnant could be even more dire. If a woman was married or engaged to be married to a man during that time, and was found to have had an extramarital affair, the man could not only call for a divorce or end of the engagement, he could press charges against the woman. Though a man having an extramarital affair during that time was generally not considered to be a problem, if a woman committed the same act it could be punishable by death. Yes, Mary choosing to go along with God's plan for her meant she was risking death in order to do so.

But we're told that her fiancé Joseph was a righteous man. So when he hears that Mary is pregnant, there is no thought to pressing charges against her for having an extramarital affair. In fact, he was even concerned about word getting out about Mary's being pregnant, thus staining her reputation. So he tried to quietly call off the wedding and hope that Mary could somehow find a way to hide the pregnancy and get married to someone else. Joseph did not even consider marrying Mary in spite of her pregnancy. In his mind, he was being more than kind by trying to dismiss her quietly. Yet we know, and Mary knew, that she did not become pregnant due to an extramarital affair, but through an act of the Holy Spirit. And when an angel of the Lord came to Joseph to inform him of this fact, Joseph, being a righteous man, chose also to follow God's plan and marry Mary, raising her son with her.

Both Mary and Joseph were faced with extremely difficult decisions. Should they choose to do the right thing? Should they choose the good? It is a question we ourselves have to struggle with daily. Should we tailgate the guy who just cut us off in traffic, or continue to keep a safe following

distance? Should we be rude to the waiter who messed up our order or be kind and understanding? Should we donate to the local food bank or just get the really nice cut of steak for our dinner? Should we donate a kidney to a friend or family member in need, in spite of the health consequences we will face? In little and big ways, we are challenged every day to choose the good, and generally with much less on the line that what Mary and Joseph had to consider. Most of the time when we choose whether or not to do the right thing, lives are not at stake—it's usually just our pride, or our comfort, or our patience.

Yet in Advent our excuses for not doing what is right pale in comparison to the examples we have been shown—the example of Joseph, who was willing to risk public disgrace, and the example of Mary, who was willing to risk destitution and even death, to follow God's call for them, to do what is right. And we're shown the example of Jesus, who as foretold in Isaiah would know how to refuse the evil and choose the good before he was able to eat curds and honey, babyfood. Yes, Advent is a time to await the coming of this very Lord, but await his coming with the proper preparation. And we're shown what that preparation is to be—to refuse the evil, and choose the good, whether the consequences are miniscule or dire.

Preparing for the coming of Christ, and being a follower of Christ in our everyday lives means more than acknowledging Christ as our savior. It is more than believing that Christ came into this world in order to gain us salvation for our sins and everlasting life. All those things are true. But if someone wants to truly follow Christ they must transform their lives and make their decisions, not based on what is fair, but what is good, what is right, as Christ did when he was only a child, not even ready to eat solid food. If we work always to try to turn away from evil and choose the good, doing what is right can begin to come as naturally to us as being able to eat solid food. But we must start by consciously thinking through our decisions and decide what the best course of action would be. We will make mistakes. We'll get angry at the customer service agent and we'll splurge on ourselves at the cost of not helping others. But each time we fail we have the opportunity to resolve to do better next time. Being a follower of Christ does not automatically imbue us with Christ's power to always choose the right, but it does give us examples we are to follow in our lives if we truly desire to become more Christ-like. As Advent ends and Christmas season begins, let us resolve ourselves to follow the examples of Joseph, Mary, and Christ himself, to refuse the evil and choose the good, regardless of the consequences. Amen.