

## **Enthroned by Love**

### **Matthew 1:18–25**

During this season of Advent, our church has been using an Advent book study called *A Child Is Born* by Amy-Jill Levine. I'll be honest with you—this book has been more challenging than others I've chosen in the past. Usually, when we do a book study, people say, "Oh, this is really good." But this one? The response has been... mixed. Some of you have shaken your heads and said, "Pastor, I'm not really sure what she's trying to say." And I've heard more people say, "Well... I don't dislike it," than "I like it." My bad!

In the book, the author talks about what she calls "type scenes"—patterns that repeat throughout the Bible—and she connects those Old Testament patterns to the birth of Jesus. That means she moves back and forth between the Old Testament and the New Testament very quickly. I'll admit, even for me, there were moments when my head started to hurt.

But as I kept wrestling with the book, something began to click. In today's scripture, we meet Joseph. And as I reflected on his story, another Joseph came to mind—the Joseph from the Old Testament. It's almost as if the two stories are echoing each other. Both Josephs are dreamers. Both are led to Egypt. And both, in their own way, take part in God's saving work.

### **Joseph the Prime Minister**

When you hear "Joseph" from the Old Testament, what first comes to mind? The man who interpreted dreams so brilliantly that he became the prime minister of Egypt. A classic success story. Many of us have probably prayed, "God, let my children grow up to be like Joseph." Successful. Powerful. Faithful, and Respected.

But if you read the story carefully, what this successful Joseph actually does is... unsettling. When he becomes the prime minister of Egypt, what does he do next? He does what empires always do. He secures the system. He accumulates. Joseph builds storehouses throughout Egypt, gathering grain during the years of abundance.

After seven years of abundance, a severe famine hits the land. The people are starving, crying out for food. Joseph opens the storehouses. So far, so good. But he doesn't give the grain. He sells it. At first, he takes their money. That sounds fair enough.

But the famine doesn't end after one year. It drags on into a second year. And eventually, the people run out of money. So what happens next? You might expect Joseph to say, "Enough is enough. Let me just give you food so you don't die." But in the system Joseph builds, there is no such thing as "free."

Genesis 47 tells us a chilling story. When the money is gone, Joseph says, "Bring your livestock." When the livestock is gone, he says, "Bring your land." And finally, when the people have nothing left, they come to him and cry out, "All we have left is our own bodies." And Joseph buys even that.

What does this mean? Joseph doesn't just save people from hunger. He transfers all the money, all the livestock, all the land—and even the people themselves—into the possession of Pharaoh. To survive, they give up their freedom.

Isn't that deeply ironic? Joseph himself knew the pain of slavery. He was sold by his own brothers and lived as a slave. And now, standing at the top of the system, he turns an entire nation into Pharaoh's slaves.

Joseph was faithful. He did save people from starvation. But the way he did it reduced human beings into parts of a machine—cogs in an empire. And later, that very system of perfect

slavery becomes a boomerang. It turns around and enslaves Joseph's own descendants, the people of Israel.

Now, my beloved Asbury family, is this frightening story something that only happened in ancient Egypt thousands of years ago? Or does it sound uncomfortably familiar? Think about the world we live in. Think about the way we are taught to dream.

Have you heard of the "FIRE" movement? FIRE stands for Financial Independence, Retire Early. The idea is this: "I'll live extremely frugally now. I won't enjoy much. I won't meet friends. I'll even skip a cup of coffee. Then later, I'll finally be free." A lot of young people are living with that dream.

But here's the irony: In order to be free someday, they become slaves to money right now. The barns get bigger. The bank accounts grow. But the soul grows smaller—more anxious, more exhausted, more stingy. We want to succeed like Joseph. But we may actually be living as slaves under another Pharaoh—named money. That's something worth reflecting on.

But the way of God's kin-dom is different from the way of the world. The kin-dom of God is built on love. And love does not seek freedom by accumulating more and enjoying more. Love opens clenched hands and fearful hearts. Love invites us to create, through sharing and letting go, a holy sanctuary within us— a space where God and others can truly dwell.

### **Foolish Joseph**

And the Joseph we meet in the Gospel of Matthew shows us what it looks like to build a sanctuary within oneself—a space where love can dwell. Who is this Joseph in Matthew's Gospel? He is the one who becomes Jesus' father. Not a prime minister. Not a powerful man. Just a faithful carpenter. And then, out of nowhere, disaster strikes. His fiancée Mary is pregnant. If I were Joseph, I would have been shaking with rage and betrayal, unable to sleep.

According to the law, Mary could have been stoned to death. But Joseph is described as a "righteous man," so he decides to break the engagement quietly. In other words, "Let's cover this up and move on." That was the best option he could see.

That night, Joseph tosses and turns in bed. And in a dream, an angel appears and says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Do you hear what that means? It means taking on Mary's shame. Taking on the whispers, the pointing fingers, the humiliation. It means becoming her shield—standing between her and the world.

Joseph surely knew what would happen if he married her. A woman carrying another man's child—by the standards of the law, an "unclean" woman. To marry her would make him unclean as well. People in the village would whisper behind his back, calling him a fool. So it wasn't that Joseph didn't love Mary. He was afraid of what loving her publicly would cost him. That's why he planned to end things quietly.

But God asks him to carry the burden with Mary. To become her protector and the protector of her child. And Joseph obeys. He takes Mary as his wife. The Joseph of the Old Testament built storehouses to protect the empire and its people. But the Joseph of the New Testament tears down his own life and makes room for Jesus to dwell. By the world's way of calculating, this is a terrible deal. A complete loss. But this is the math of love. This is the accounting of the kin-dom of God.

### **The One Who Gave Jesus the Greatest Gift**

At Christmas, we often talk about the gifts of the wise men—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Precious, expensive gifts. Honestly, I wouldn't mind receiving something like that

myself. But do you know who actually gave Jesus the greatest gift? It wasn't the wise men. It was Joseph.

We call Jesus "the Son of David." But how did Jesus become a descendant of David? According to Jewish law, if the mother is Jewish, the child is Jewish. But a child's family line—what house the child belongs to—follows the father. Jesus became "the Son of David" because Joseph married Mary and said, "This child is my son," even though not a drop of Joseph's blood ran in him.

By placing Jesus on the family register as his own, Joseph made it possible for Jesus to be recognized as a descendant of King David. Joseph laid down his honor, his pride, his reputation—everything precious to him—and spread it on the ground, so that the child Jesus could be enthroned as the Son of David. In this way, Joseph gave up his own throne and offered it to Jesus, out of love.

When you think about it, many of you have lived Joseph-like lives. You made choices not for your own comfort or recognition, but for your children and grandchildren. You set aside dreams, worked quietly, and let your own story fade into the background so the next generation could have more opportunity.

You stepped down from your own throne and became a foundation for others to stand on. That was Joseph's heart. That was Joseph's love. By the world's way of calculating, it looks foolish. But in God's eyes, this kind of love became the channel through which the world was saved.

### **The One Who Gave Up the Throne in Love**

My Beloved Asbury family, what kind of Joseph are we choosing to be? Are we living as Prime Minister Joseph—so busy filling our own storehouses, postponing love in the name of "future freedom"? Or are we willing to be Carpenter Joseph—accepting a little loss, even looking a little foolish, and offering our place in life so that others may be saved, built up, and so that God's will may be done?

Advent is a season of waiting. And even now, God is waiting—waiting for those "foolish Josephs" who will welcome God's Son, Jesus, onto the throne of their hearts. This Christmas, what if we put the calculator down for a moment—stop measuring what benefits us—and become holy fools who are willing to lose something for the sake of love?

When we do, I believe our homes and our church will become a warm manger where Christ can dwell. May our church be a community that enthrones Christ in love. Amen.