



GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

December 17, 2017

Discussion Guide

LIFE THE WAY IT USED TO BE

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- ARE YOU A PERSON WHO LIKES THINGS MESSY OR CLEAN? COULD YOU ELABORATE?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- USING THE NOTES, TALK ABOUT THE PROCESS OF MARRIAGE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL.
- REACH MATTHEW 1.18-25 ALOUD. PAUSE. READ THE TEXT ONCE MORE, ALOUD.
- IN THIS TEXT, IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MAKE THINGS MESSY? SEEK TO FIND AS MANY EXAMPLES AS POSSIBLE.

- DO YOU THINK PEOPLE VIEW GOD AS SOMEONE WHO MAKES THINGS MESSY AND THEN INVITES HIS PEOPLE TO JOIN HIM IN THE MESS? COULD YOU EXPLAIN?
- WHAT MESSY INVITATIONS, LIKE GOD'S INVITATION TO JOSEPH, MIGHT GOD BE EXTENDING TO HIS PEOPLE TODAY?
- WHAT REASONS, IF ANY, MIGHT PEOPLE GIVE FOR AVOIDING GOD'S MESSY INVITATIONS?
- WHAT MIGHT IT TAKE TO EMBOLDEN GOD'S PEOPLE TO SAY "YES" TO GOD'S MESSY INVITATIONS?
- READ ISAIAH 61.1-4 AND PONDER WHAT IT IS SAYING ABOUT HOW GOD PLANS TO DEAL WITH LIFE'S MESS. IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, MIGHT THESE TRUTHS EMBOLDEN GOD'S PEOPLE TO JOIN HIM IN MESSY SITUATIONS?
- CONSIDER CLOSING BY DISCUSSING WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE TO HELD TO THE HOPE OFFERED IN ISAIAH 61. PRAY AS A GROUP FOR GOD'S COURAGE AND HIS PEACE AS YOU HEAR AND RESPOND TO HIS MESSY INVITATIONS.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

MARRIAGE

In ancient Israel, marriage formed the primary building block of kinship and family. There is no clear biblical evidence of what age Israelite men and women were married, but it appears likely that such marriages occurred in their mid-teens. Later rabbinic texts from the Mishna, a written record of ancient rabbinic thinking about applying the Mosaic Law, appear to suggest that in Jesus' time men were married around age 18 (m. Abot 5.21).

Further, we have no evidence that every marriage was accompanied with a ceremony. Most likely, these took place when wealthier families were involved. While some ancient cultures had laws governing the process leading up to a marriage, the Israelites had no such legislation. It was not uncommon for the parents of a young man to choose a woman for their son to marry (Genesis 21.21; 38.6), but choice on the part of those getting married was not unknown in Israelite culture (Ruth 2-4).

Israelites seem to have approached marriage as a process which began with the choosing of a spouse. If this was done by one's parents then such choosing could take place during one's childhood. However, it was more likely that this choosing took place during one's teen years. This choosing did not involve a formal contract, but it did stipulate a date on which the second stage of betrothal would be initiated.

Betrothal involved the making of official arrangements for a wedding. This involved a legally binding contract complete with stipulations which had to be met such as the paying of a dowry before the marriage might be consummated (m. Qiddushin). During this time of betrothal, the future spouses were officially bound together but lived in separate households with the family of the woman fastidiously guarding her virginity, proof of which could be demanded on the wedding night (Deuteronomy 22.13-21). The only way to end a betrothal was through a formal divorce (m. Ketub 1.2; 4.2).

When all of the betrothal stipulations were met, the woman was given to the man and they consummated their marriage. This may have involved a procession of the bridegroom and his companions to the bride's home followed by a return to the groom's home where a wedding supper was held. After the supper, the bride and groom consummated the marriage and then joined their guests for

a celebratory feast (Matthew 22.1-14; Psalm 45.14-15). However, these events may only have been practiced among wealthier families who could afford such extravagant events.

THE TEXT

MATTHEW 1.18-25: *HOPE FOR OUR MESS*

Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy tracing the lineage of Jesus back to Abraham. He carefully constructed this genealogy in order to emphasize God's desire to include messy people in his redemptive work, a truth Matthew himself experienced (Matthew 9.9-13). As Immanuel, God planned to step into messy situations and lives, and invited his people to join him in this redemptive work (Luke 15). Matthew's record of the birth of Jesus and Joseph's response provides a vivid example of how this worked in everyday life for God's people.

Having established that God was interested in making messy people part of his redemptive work, Matthew turns to the birth of Jesus, focusing primarily on God's invitation to Joseph to join him in his redemptive work with messy lives and situations. Matthew recounts that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. This note is important because it marks the specific point at which Mary and Joseph were in the marriage process: betrothal. If Joseph and Mary represent typical Israelites of the period, Joseph is about 18 and Mary is in her mid-teens. After agreeing that they will one day be married, their parents have formalized a marriage contract and are in the process of fulfilling the stipulations so that Mary and Joseph might formally consummate their marriage. During this time, Mary and Joseph would have lived with their respective families. Joseph and his family would be engaged in preparations to receive Mary into their home while Mary's family would be fastidiously guarding her virginity so they might provide proof of such on the wedding night (Deuteronomy 22.13-21).

It is in this period that Mary is discovered to be pregnant. If we follow Luke's chronology (Luke

1.26-45), then she is about 4 months pregnant when Joseph learns of her condition. This is obviously a problem because Mary's family appears to have failed to protect her virginity. While Mary protests that she has remained sexually pure, arguing that the child has been conceived through the work of God himself, Joseph can only believe that she has been unfaithful. Because their betrothal officially tied them together, Mary is guilty of adultery. In this situation, Joseph has two options. He could report Mary so she might be tried for adultery which would most likely lead to her death (m. Sota 1.1, 5). However, he could also initiate legal proceedings to divorce her, thus giving Mary's family the opportunity to wed Mary to the rightful father of the child. The first option would be just but bring great shame upon Mary and her family. The second option was also just, but was tempered with compassion for Mary's family and the child. In Israelite society, divorces could be made public affairs or they could be done quietly with a simple writ of divorce (Deuteronomy 24.1). That Joseph wished to divorce Mary quietly seems to imply he desired to pursue this last option which maintained his integrity and allowed him to pursue compassion.

However, before Joseph can act upon his plan to divorce Mary, God sends an angel to Joseph. This angel invites Joseph to proceed with his intentions to wed Mary, encouraging him not to fear walking this path, and there was much to fear. For Joseph to wed Mary, the final stipulations of the betrothal had to be met and Mary was already about 4 months pregnant. By the time the two would be able to wed, Mary would almost be full term. To wed Mary in such a condition would bring great shame upon Joseph because of how such a choice would affect his social standing and honor. By choosing to wed her near full term, the people of Nazareth would either think that Joseph has improper sexual relations with Mary or that he was afraid to

challenge the man who did. Neither scenario left Joseph untouched, but both would force him to navigate a life filled with shame and disgrace among his people. To willfully choose this path was to choose a difficult, messy life with Mary. It is into this messy, difficult life that God was inviting Joseph. He invites Joseph into this life not arguing that it won't be messy but noting that Joseph does not need to be afraid because God himself is involved in the mess. Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit. Further, God gives Joseph hope. By stepping into this messy situation, Joseph will become part of God's movement to rescue people from their sin. The child to be born will bear the name "Jesus" or "God saves" because he will rescue people from their sin.

Matthew turns aside to remind his readers that this whole situation happened as it did as part of the fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy (Isaiah 7.14), and he has already described the trajectory of that prophecy. It is about God making messy people and things part of his redemptive plan. This turning aside is not unlike Matthew saying, "Need I say more about how God planned to work as Immanuel?"

Joseph wakes and did as the angel commanded. Much discussion has been had over Joseph's obedience. Why did he obey? In keeping with a common platitude, some argue that God said it so Joseph did it. However, the reasoning behind Joseph's obedience runs much deeper than this. Joseph was faced with a choice not of obeying God but of joining God in his redemptive plan called Immanuel. As an upright and compassionate man, Joseph longed to be part of what God was doing in the world, a truth seen in how he sought to handle Mary's pregnancy. When faced with the opportunity to join with God, he simply said "Yes." However, where God was to be found was in the midst of a messy situation, but somehow, God promised to use this messy situation to undo the larger effects of sin.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

Immanuel. God with us. It sounds so wonderful until you realize just how God planned to be with us. He planned to be with us in our mess. He planned to invite us to join him in the mess. I like the first part. I am not too fond of the second part. You see, my life is full of enough mess; thank you. I don't need any more mess because to add any more will leave me drowning in it. Personally, I do my best to avoid the messes of life and I long for a day when there will no longer be any more mess. Sometimes my longing takes me back to remembering simpler times when life seemed less messy. I imagine playing as a child with few to no cares and I think how wonderful it would be to go back to that time, a time before bills and politics and a job and dealing with other adults. I don't know if my life was better then. It just seemed less messy. I want less messy. So, if that is the goal, why would I willingly step into more mess?

I am coming to realize that God and I are on the same page about mess, at least for the most part. Like me, God longs for the mess to go away. Like me, he longs for a simpler time, a time when there was no mess. His "back in the day" goes way back to a garden called Eden. However, unlike me, God seems bent on getting messy. That makes no sense to me. If the goal is to end the mess, why would we want to get messy? I think Joseph would understand what I am saying. Here is a guy who loved God and hated messes. When Mary showed up and told him what her mid-section was already saying, Joseph was confronted with one big mess. Like me, he sought to avoid it. He loved God. He wanted to do the right thing and the right thing seemed to be to avoid the mess. I like Joseph. I get him. But God invited Joseph to jump into the mess and Joseph did. I don't get that about Joseph. Did he flip his lid? I wish I could go back in time and say, "Dude, what are you thinking?" I wonder how that conversation might go. Maybe it would go something like this, "Blake, God is in this mess and he says the only way to get rid of the mess is to go through it with him." I don't know if I would get it at first, but I think I am

more and more open to wrestling with what it means, with what it means for who I think God is, for how he wants me to live my life, and for what he really wants to do with all the mess.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

With Christmas, God began a wonderful work of redemption, a work which is meant to end the mess we have made with our sin. We get this. What we struggle to get is how God seems to make things messier as he works redemptively. He begins his work and rather than making things tidier, he makes a bigger mess, and he invites his people to join him in this mess. How can inviting an honest man to endure a lifetime of shame which was not his be anything but making things messier? We would rather say "No" to the mess, and often we do. On our faith journeys, we do the best we can to avoid messy people and situations. However, God is in the mess and he invites us to join him because the only way to deal with the mess is to go through it with him. This is a painful and terrifying prospect. How does one say "Yes" to this invitation of God? As we come to the third week of Advent, our candle turns from purple to pink. The purple or violet candles represent repentance, but the pink or rose candle symbolizes hope. It is a moment to rest and breathe in this heavy season of Advent, a time to consider the hope that we have in God. What hope? In our Advent reading of Isaiah 61.1-4, we see that we have the hope that God will successfully deal with the mess, and that there will be goodness and life on the other side. It is this hope that gives us courage to respond affirmatively to God's messy invitations. We can say "Yes" because we know that while we may not understand how God is working, we know he is working and we know where his work will end. Knowing this, we join him in his work because we wish to share in its fruit.



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP