

We turn now to a reading from the gospel of Matthew. Whereas the gospel of Luke focuses on Mary's version of events concerning the birth of the Christ child, the gospel of Matthew focuses on Joseph. It is clear that Matthew prepares his gospel for a Jewish audience to hear. Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus tracing his ancestry back to David and eventually to Abraham. This genealogy is traced through Joseph.

Matthew breaks down the genealogy of Jesus into 14 generations. 14 is 2 times 7. Seven is a symbolic number in the Bible representing completeness. By using 14 generations, Matthew is tying Jesus into both a present reality and a future Messiah. Matthew believes that Jesus is both the present and the future.

We know very little about Joseph. We learn later in the gospel of Matthew that he is a carpenter. In the Scripture that we are about to read we are going to learn that Joseph is engaged to Mary.

“Now being engaged was a bit different in Joseph's day than in ours. There were three stages to the process. It began as a contract arranged by families and witnessed by two outsiders. An announcement was made and gifts were exchanged. Secondly, came the period of betrothal. This lasted one year, insuring that the bride was a virgin.

During this period the woman was called 'wife' and the engagement could only be released by a 'divorce.' Thirdly, all of this was consummated at the marriage feast, after which the groom took the bride to his home. It was during the year-long period of betrothal that Mary had to tell Joseph she was pregnant.”

According to what we read in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, Mary could be tried publicly and executed for adultery. The rules were clearly set up harsher for women than men.

Read Matthew 1:18-25 (stop after reading for music)

This week I have been paying attention with some sadness to the saga that has been Wake Forest University football. Wake Forest is, of course, the Baptist related college in Winston-Salem that is well known for its academic rigors including its medical school. I have toured Wake Forest on college visits and attended classes at its divinity school. The college visits are highlighted by free Krispy-Kreme donuts.

With less than 5,000 under-graduate students, Wake Forest is one of the smallest schools playing football in what is called the FBS or the highest classification of college football. Wake Forest has a solid reputation and is kind of considered that little brother in the ACC that the bigger schools kind of pull for to have some success but not too much success. ACC fans like myself want them to win a bowl game just not the ACC championship which they actually did in 2006.

This week Wake Forest has been in the news for an embarrassing reason. It was discovered by an equipment manager a few weeks ago that an opposing team had acquired all of their plays prior to the game. Wake Forest determined that someone within the Wake Forest football family was a traitor.

After an investigation it was determined that one of their radio announcers was that cheater. This particular announcer was a former Wake Forest assistant football coach who, apparently, has a grievance against the current head coach for not hiring him as one of his assistants.

Can you imagine how it must feel to be a coach or player on the Wake Forest football team right now? Can you imagine the sense of betrayal that they must feel? A man that they trusted and had welcomed into their practices and meetings and was an alumni of the school and the football team would betray them that way?

It is not a pleasant feeling when you are betrayed. It does not feel pleasant when someone you trust cheats on you. Whether it is a coach, radio announcer, and especially, a marriage partner.

Joseph must have felt this tremendous sense of betrayal. His wife Mary comes to him and tells him that she is pregnant. She has presented him with a scandal. How would he deal with this? What would he tell his family? A family that he was most likely still living with in a home.

But then an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and tells him that all is not as it seems. This angel tells Joseph the amazing news that Mary has not cheated on him but that God has had a hand in all of this. Mary will bear a child and he will be “Immanuel” which means “God with Us.”

This is actually a quote from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah that we read earlier in the service. Joseph listens to the angel and announces that this child will be named “Jesus.” Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joseph and the name Jesus means, “The Lord Saves or Helps.”

Joseph becomes a secondary character in this story. But a very important character nonetheless. For Joseph accepts the role as best supporting actor to Mary and Jesus as the main characters. Joseph accepts the secondary role of supporter and protector.

Every good production needs its main actors. But every good production needs a great supporting cast to be a success. Every football team has its superstars but, as Wake Forest has shown us, if even one person doesn't do their role faithfully then the entire team can be brought down.

So who are you to play a supporting role to this Christmas? It may even be someone whom you feel has betrayed you in some way in the past. Are you to play a supporting role with a spouse? Are you to play a supporting role with a friend, teammate, or classmate? Are you to play a supporting role by encouraging someone who you feel is doing something important in the world?

Joseph's supporting role to Mary was extremely important. You too may be called this Christmas season to play a huge supporting role as well. AMEN.

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-Barnes, Craig, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/current-sermon-starters/#ss>

-Given: December 18, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)