

“The Miracle Season: Service”
Matthew 1:18-25

A few months ago, I read a book called *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving (image of book on screen). A friend had suggested it as a good book relating to our American context and some of our social struggles around race. In addition to having great content, what I loved is that the author talked about her personal journey of transformation. Irving talks about her awakening to see how the things she took for granted were things that were privileges that came from her race and family background. Her thoughts and her assumptions were almost invisible to her because she never allowed anything new to enter in. Let's watch a clip of Irving speaking about her White privilege (first five minutes of this video):

<https://youtu.be/oD5Ox5XNEpg>

(Second service) Irving assumed that in America we all start on a level playing field and that we all have access to the same opportunities. Because of growing up in a middle/upper class white family, she took for granted a lot of things such as education, access to connections, and family inheritance. It was not until she took a course on race that she began to understand some of the challenges other people from different backgrounds face in their lives. I love how this class transformed her perspective and made her an advocate to help others understand some of the false assumptions we make. It turned her life and perspective upside down. As a result, she used her privilege to serve others for the sake of love.

In a way that is what happened to Joseph, Mary's fiancé. Joseph had the male privilege in a very patriarchal society. He had the upper hand in his relationship with Mary. He had all the rights and privileges, while she had none. Mary and Joseph were betrothed (legally married) but their wedding day had not come yet. It was a major source of shame for both to have her become pregnant. As a man, he had the right to publicly humiliate her and to let society defend his honor. This was a very tense situation for him. Her life was on the line because she would have been stoned by the community to make an object lesson of her (Deuteronomy 22:19-22). Just like escaped slaves in our country were punished publicly by beatings, branding, and other horrendous physical pain, women were supposed to be punished for sexual improprieties to make sure other women didn't dare step out of line. Through the threat of violence, women knew their proper place. All of this is to say that what Joseph ended up doing was incredibly hard and courageous. He had every right to avenge his honor, but because of his faith and his love for God, he was transformed into an essential part of the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. A dream revealed to Joseph that his decision to divorce Mary was wrong and he believed it. A dream showed him that the baby was the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah about the presence of God with the people of ancient Israel. It is interesting to think that the whole story of Jesus hinged on a dream and someone believing it! But that is the pattern of God's love when it takes hold of our hearts. Love always transforms one human being or one group of people to trust in God's vision and to risk their own safety for the sake of God's greater purposes.

Joseph could have played it safe by staying with what he knew, and no one would have blamed him for it. But he was part of a religious community that paid attention regularly to dreams and to God speaking to them. I am sure that from an early age Joseph knew the biblical stories of others who dreamed like Jacob and Joseph from Genesis. The Jewish patterns of daily prayers and rituals in the home were embedded in the hearts and minds of his people that even in moments of great despair, his mind and his heart were open to a message beyond his control and his understanding.

In the movie “The Miracle Season” we hear about the story of someone’s ability to love generously transforming a whole community. Caroline Found was born into privilege. Her father was a successful surgeon. Her mother had a master’s degree. She was beautiful and popular in school. She had excellent athletic abilities. She had every reason to only focus on herself and her small world. Let’s watch a clip from the beginning of the movie where we see many privileges that surrounded Caroline. (Clip from beginning of the movie to minute 3:05) Caroline lived the American dream. She could have been stuck up or self-absorbed. But the opposite was true of this 17-year old. She was always dedicated to serving, loving, and building up others around her. If she was focused on herself and on living in her privilege, her death would have been tragic, but her life would not have made such a tremendous difference in the world. Because love, faith, and service to others were the deep roots and essential values of her family, Caroline was able to live her life to its fullest and to impact the world in such a lasting and powerful way. I love that at the end of the movie, when her team was getting ready to play their championship game, Caroline’s coach reminded all in attendance of the power of reaching out to others in service and love. She made them do something to Live Like Line! (show clip 121:17 to 122:55 coach speaking before the game and making everyone greet someone they did not know.)

(second service) The coach made everyone in the stadium turn to their neighbors and greet them, but the catch was to reach out to someone they did not know! That was the true legacy which Caroline left for them. They followed in her footsteps of love. The same invitation is before us today to reach out in love. We can get stuck focusing on ourselves, our needs, our dreams, our privileges, and even our struggles but if we are to live by the power of the story of Joseph, of Debby Irving, of Caroline or of Jesus, we must be willing to let God break into our ordered patterns of thought which tend to keep us locked in our focus on ourselves. Have you ever paid attention to the patterns of your thinking? If you have not, try it for just one day. It is powerful when we observe the patterns of our thoughts both individually or as a society. We tend to reinforce and repeat the same patterns and thoughts each day which makes it hard for us to pay attention to something new breaking into our lives and into our world. It is sometimes even hard to hear God speaking to us when our patterns are so fortified. Ask yourself about the frequency with which you open yourself to new ways to think, love, and serve God and others. Paul Ferrini writes, “When you hold onto your experience or use it to interpret the present experience, you ‘take control’ of your life, and push God (grace) away. When you surrender your ideas about the way things should be, let go of the past, and open to the future, you invite God back into your life.”

I would like to invite you to turn to two or three neighbors (preferably people you don't know) and talk about how these stories impact you. We will take a few moments to share as a whole.

I would like to end with a quote from writer Barbara Brown Taylor about Joseph (screen): "The heart of the story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it. He owns this mess, he legitimates it and gives it a name, and the mess becomes the place where new life is born." Amen.