Finding God in the Middle of Our Disappointments  
Matthew 1:18-24

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:
23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

What is the earliest memory of your life? One of my earliest memories is a memory of disappointment, and while the details in my mind are vague, I remember one thing clearly. Disappointment hurts, and it’s a hurt you don’t soon forget.
I remember being at my house. My grandmother was there with me. My father and mother had gone to the hospital, but before they left, they told me they would be bringing home a new brother or sister.

I can remember how excited I was. Until then, I had been an only child and often was lonely, longing for a brother or sister who could be my playmate.

I vaguely remember my grandmother crying and I didn’t know why. She was always a cheerful soul and it upset me to see her cry.

And then, I remember my grandfather bringing me a new ball, a bright, red ball and I wasn’t sure why I was getting the gift. I remember asking if the ball was for my new brother, but he told me that the ball was for me. And then he said the words I will never forget. “I’m sorry Gene, but things didn’t work out like we planned. We thought you were getting a new brother or sister, but something happened at the hospital. Your mom and dad are okay, but your new brother went home to be with Jesus.”

I think that was the first time I was mad at Jesus. I didn’t think it was right for him to take my brother away from me. Of course, as a child, I didn’t understand anything about childbirth - or about child death. I just knew I had my hopes up for a new brother, and according to my grandparents, Jesus had shattered my hopes.

Yes, one of my first memories was a memory of disappointment. Unfortunately, that was not my last memory of disappointment. For all of us who dare to embrace hope, disappointment is a certain reality, because
sometimes our hopes are shattered. Sometimes life just doesn’t work out as we plan.

People die at the wrong time. Those we trust sometimes prove untrustworthy. Those we love sometimes prove unfaithful. Those wonderful plans we have made for our future are sometimes erased by forces beyond our control. Sometimes our dreams turn into nightmares, and sometimes our visions fade like a vapor consumed by the heat of failure.

Disappointment. Even the word seems too heavy to speak, too burdensome to bear, but it’s a word we all know too well, and even when surrounded by the cheerful festivities of the Christmas season, sometimes disappointment raises its ugly head and makes us curse the day we dared to embrace hope.

But for Christians, disappointment should never be a word followed by a period. A period denotes finality. A period says, “Disappointment is the end, there’s nothing more to come.” Instead, for Christians, disappointment should always be followed by a comma, the punctuation mark of things yet to come; because if we have faith in the loving providence of God, God’s final word is never “disappointment.”

I like what Martin Luther King said about disappointment. He stated, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” Yes, in Jesus Christ, disappointment is real, but it is never the last word. In Christ, there is always a reason to embrace divine hope. That’s why, in 2 Corinthians 4 Paul could write, We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. Yes, for Paul, and for all other followers of Christ, disappointment is real, but it’s never God’s last word.

As strange as it sounds, the Christmas story is one of disappointment, at least it was for the main character of today’s text – Joseph, the man engaged to Mary, the mother of Christ.

As you and I read the Christmas story, too often we read past Joseph’s pain, because we already know how his story ends. We know that, in the end, Joseph gets to become one of the most significant characters in Christian history. Just look at our nativities. We know that Joseph gets to stand in the stable beside Jesus Christ.

But for a moment today, I want us to sip the cup of Joseph’s disappointment, to imagine what he felt like and to deal with the torment of those painful thoughts that once fill his troubled heart and mind.

Today’s text tells us that Mary was “pledged to be married to Joseph.” In biblical days, the pledge of marriage was something more than a mere engagement. When a couple was pledged or “betrothed,” they were contractually obligated to be married. Dowries were paid. Land was deeded to the couple and homes were purchased. Since betrothal was a legally binding contract, the only way this contract could be broken was through divorce. That’s why the text tells us that Joseph initially decided to divorce Mary privately.
But this talk about the legality of betrothal is really not as significant as the pain of disappointment Joseph surely experienced. Put yourself in Joseph’s place. What would you do if you discovered your fiancé was pregnant with a baby that was not yours?

When Joseph discovered that his fiancé was pregnant, everything right went wrong. Mary seemingly had violated his trust, and to make matters worse, she had come up with this unbelievable story about becoming pregnant through an encounter with the Spirit of God. That must have been a double whammy for Joseph, because we sense he was devoutly religious man. So Mary’s story not only offended his manly pride, but it also offended his spiritual sensitivities.

Though the words are few in this text, we realize that Joseph struggled greatly with what he should do next. Should he go ahead with the wedding? How could he? If he married her while she was pregnant, people would have assumed he was as guilty as she was, and if he couldn’t trust Mary before the wedding, how was he to trust her afterward? Should he let his disappointment and anger force Mary to accept the public disgrace she rightly deserved by divorcing her in a public court of law? At first, that’s probably what he wanted to do. But finally, even in the middle of his disappointment, he could not ignore the fact that he had come to love Mary, to love her deeply, and that his only option was to divorce her in a way that tried to protect what little dignity she had left.
Yes, Joseph’s disappointment was devastating, and none of his options seemed good. But as we continue to read the text, we see a beautiful twist unwind in the plot. God takes Joseph’s disappointment and reveals to him new truth, truth that only he and Mary could fully embrace - truth that turns his dark night of the soul into the brightest sunrise of his existence.

In a dream, he discovers that Mary is actually telling the truth - that the child within her was not only conceived of the Spirit, but is the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God.

Yes, the dawning of divine truth sheds new light on Joseph’s disappointment. It gives Joseph options he could have never imagined.

But let me point out something very significant here. Even after the dream, Joseph had a decision to make. He had to determine whether his dream was simply the futile hope of a man in love, or the wonderful message of God. In the end, Joseph had to decide if he could dismiss the hope of his old life to embrace the promise of a new one.

That’s always the choice we face when embracing disappointment. When disappointment comes our way we have a choice. We can grovel in the pain of what might have been, or we can look across the divine horizon to see the dawning of God’s new day. In the end, when disappointment comes our way, we must let go of the plans we had for old life so we can embrace the new life God has in store.

That, my friends, is the definition of true faith. Faith refuses to mark disappointment with a period. Faith chooses, instead, to mark disappointment
with a comma, knowing that God’s sentence is not finished, knowing that, in
his loving providence, God has something else in store, something that may
transcend our wildest imagination.

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When I was in the third grade, I began playing the trombone. My family
was poor, and because my parents could not afford to buy me an instrument,
the band director loaned me a trombone owned by the school. So over the next
four years, I played the loaner trombone.

A few weeks before I finished elementary school, the band teacher sent a
note home to my parents about purchasing the loaner trombone at a minimal
price. He also told them that since I was moving on to middle school, I would
have to turn the trombone back into the school unless my parents purchased
the loaner.

I was thoroughly excited when I brought the note home to my parents. I
knew we couldn’t afford a new trombone, but I was pretty sure we could buy
the old, used one.

When my parents read the note, they looked at each other and said,
“Sorry, Gene. I don’t think that’s what we want to do.”

I can’t begin to describe my feelings of anger and disappointment. I had
virtually fallen in love with the old instrument and looked forward to taking it
with me to play in the middle school band.

I still remember my feelings on the last day of elementary school. I
remember saying goodbye to my old trombone and then getting on the bus to
come home. No longer was I angry at my parents but I was hurt, deeply disappointed and feeling a real sense of loss.

I remember getting off the bus and going up to my room to change clothes. As I opened the door, I couldn’t believe what I saw on my bed. There before me was a shiny, bright, new trombone. As I ran over to get it, I glanced behind me and saw the beaming faces of my parents. Obviously, they had declined the offer on the old trombone because they knew they had something better in store for me. And for a brief time, they had let me taste the dregs of disappointment, because they didn’t want to ruin the surprise of their wonderful, marvelous gift.

That’s the way Joseph must have felt when he looked into the eyes of baby Jesus. Yes, for a brief time, Joseph tasted the bitter dregs of disappointment, but now the bad taste was gone. It was replaced, instead, with the wonder and amazement of God’s beautiful, new gift, the babe in Bethlehem’s manger.

Disappointment. It’s a word we all know too well, but we must remember that disappointment is never God’s final word. Disappointment is always a word followed by a comma, a punctuation mark that promises more to come.

And what will follow our disappointment? Only God knows, and so we must look up from disappointment’s darkness to see the horizon of God’s brand new day, for in that day, God just may reveal the most wonderful gift of all.