

“What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

That line is from a Mary Oliver poem, “The Summer Day.” Every time I hear that line, it fills me both with wonder and a little trepidation. Wonder, because the fact that *my* life is wild and precious is a beautiful thought. And trepidation because I feel a bit of pressure: what *will* I do with my life? Will I make an impact? Will I make a difference? Will it be big enough?

What plans do you have for your life? What dreams, hopes, goals, are you envisioning in your future?

When I think about this notion, I almost always think of *big* things: game-changers. I want to have an oversized impact.

If I were connecting it to the nativity story, I’d want to be Mary. I’d want to answer the angel will trust and grace. I’d want to rush to my relative to share this news and sing a song of God’s goodness. I’d want to be the bearer of God, the one who carries the incarnation to birth.

I would be...less inclined...to be Joseph. I mean, he doesn’t even say anything that our gospels found worth of being written down.

And yet, he still has a vital role to play. In thinking about Joseph, we have precious little detail given to us in scripture, but I like the way that another pastor describes him:

“He was a carpenter, we think, or maybe a stoneworker. The word is tricky to translate but we know he worked with his hands. Hard, backbreaking work, pounding out a living in the desert of Galilee, finding his way in the hot sun and the hard granite and the skinny trees. Mending fishermen’s boats. Fixing doors. We could think of him in beat up work boots, with a hammer in the sling of his jeans.

He worked with his hands. A hard life. A life where righteousness is shown not in words but in actions. A man of strength and purpose. Trustworthy. The kind of guy who could fix things. The kind of guy who snowblows his own driveway and then takes care of the next-door neighbors’, too.

He paid his taxes, demanded from him by the Roman empire. He turned his face away when he passed crosses on the side of Roman roads, the punishment for insurrection, for riots and protests, for refusing to follow Caesar’s rule. With his neighbors he quietly mourned the oppression of Israel, the empty throne of David. It seemed, at least, that God’s promises of a land and a people of Israel, a free people, a light to the nations – that those promises had all gone dark. The Jewish people were freed from Egypt, they returned from Babylon, but still they are not free.

Joseph was an ordinary man, living day to day, in a poor town called Nazareth. Like most ordinary people of his time, likely couldn't read. He probably couldn't write. But he went to the local synagogue on Saturday, and he journeyed to the Temple each year for Passover, and he did the best he could to be a righteous man – a follower of the Law. A trustworthy man, who trusted God.

A simple and hard and humble life.¹⁷

I enjoy this fuller picture of who Joseph was. And it is this fuller picture that helps me appreciate and see all the ways in which Joseph's quiet faithfulness was exactly what was needed as part of this team chosen to raise Jesus in such trying circumstances.

When I feel that my life might be too quiet, I am able to remind myself that quiet does not mean inactive. It does not mean unimpactful. It does not mean unimportant. It does not mean passive.

It's about what we do with that life, even if it is quiet.

Some of us are born leaders, ready to take charge, to sing our own song of praise, to be visible and obvious in our advocacy or in our relationships.

And some of us prefer to work behind the scenes, just as bold, just as committed, but in a different way.

There is not a better or worse way. What is important is that we are willing to participate in God's work in the world, in whichever way is most authentic to who we are.

For some, that means joining in marches or protests against injustice or using their social media presence as a megaphone for the causes most important to them. You can always count on this person to know which groups are doing what and the best way offer support.

For some, it might be supporting those earlier folks with monetary or material donations to further the cause. It might mean being a point person to organize collections and provide transportation.

For others, it might mean being a little more behind the scenes, cooking or serving meals at a shelter or community center in an anonymous way.

It could mean bringing groceries or other supplies to someone who is going through a tough time.

It could mean running for public office or working in public policy to try and create change at a much higher level.

There are *so* many ways we can be active in the reign of God and God is pleased when we embark on any of them out of faith and trust in God.

That's what Joseph did. When faced with the unimaginable and probably fighting feelings of betrayal, fear, and confusion, Joseph leans on his faith and chooses to trust the angel—to trust God.

He didn't have to. He could have escaped the engagement with little damage to his own reputation. He could have found another wife, probably without too much trouble. Even after the angel appeared, he had to know that the life ahead wouldn't be easy.

In the first couple of years, he had to take his family into hiding to escape Herod's murderous hunt. At twelve, his son was already holding court outside the temple. All of which is to say nothing about what Jesus' life was like once his ministry really got started in earnest.

Joseph knew that keeping his commitment to Mary and choosing to help raise this child would change his life into something he had never considered and something he had never asked for.

And yet, he trusted. He believed. He had faith that God would work through him, even as quiet as our scripture portrays him to be. God knew, not only that Mary was the right choice, but that Joseph was, too. I believe that he wasn't a default choice because he happened to be engaged to Mary, but that both Mary *and* Joseph were chosen as the right partnership to bring Jesus to adulthood.

So, child of God, what is it *you* plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

You never know, it could change the course of history.

Amen.

ⁱ Emmy Kegler. https://emmykegler.substack.com/p/sermon-on-matthew-118-25-a-blue-collar?fbclid=IwAR3B_BY1nxxDJCz8hEAdV960T-m2zfdZ6OJkC4HcT3ryCymgayAvrXYoXA. Accessed December 17, 2022.