

## **I. Intro** *John Bartel story*

About 30 years ago, John Bartel was a healthy, athletic 20-year-old young man who was gradually taking full charge of the family dairy farm.

One beautiful spring day in the green Fraser Valley of British Columbia, the grass was just right for filling the silos for winter feed. John was busily unloading the fodder into the silage cutter and blower when a large bunch momentarily stopped the conveyor belt. By sheer habit, John stepped on the guilty bunch to get it moving again. His eyes were selecting the next place to insert his pitchfork, when he felt a tug on his right leg. He watched in horror as his foot and leg were shredded by the machinery.

When he finally extracted himself, all he had left of his leg was a short stub. Praying earnestly all the while, he undid his belt and used it as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. Painfully, he dragged himself into the milk parlor of the dairy and called for an ambulance.

A few days after the surgery, John sat in his wheelchair in the hospital sun room, feeling sorry for himself and wishing himself dead, rather than handicapped for the rest of his life. He noticed another person in a wheelchair enter the room. A middle-aged man sat there with a blanket around him and looked at John with some disdain. He said, "Young man, shame on you whining away like that here. You should be thankful that you're alive and healthy!"

John replied coldly, "You don't understand – My leg is gone forever!"

"Well then, look at this," replied the man as he threw off the blanket and revealed two stubs about as long as John's. He then continued, "Son, get well here. Then go out there and prove to the world that you can do as much with one leg as anyone else who has two legs."

John went back to the farm and after a number of fittings, had a prosthetic leg and foot made to suit his needs. Some fifteen years after the accident, he was milking up to seventy cows at a time on the family farm, of which he took over full possession. He was active swimming and waterskiing and riding trail bikes with his son. He and his wife Margaret are active in their church. He has a good sense of humor and a living, practical faith with determination to succeed. He became an encouragement and example to everyone.

Some of you may know people like John, whose gritty determination and amazing faith are a source of inspiration to those around them, in the face of obstacles that would defeat most of us.

I think, from our Advent Scripture texts, that Joseph could also be one of those people.

## **II. Let's look at how Joseph responded in faith to what had to be devastating, life-changing news**

## **A. Joseph was a man facing a major crisis: his fiancée was pregnant and HE was not the father**

### 1. What were his choices, as a Jewish man of dignity?

- a) He could let her stand trial for adultery, because in such matters in those days, engagement was as serious a commitment as marriage itself ... & he knew that subjecting her to the Jewish justice system could result in her death by stoning
- b) The other choice he had was to divorce her

### 2. Joseph decided to do the latter

## **B. But that was really only the 1<sup>st</sup> of 2 decisions he had to make ... decisions that revealed a lot about his righteous character**

### 1. The 1<sup>st</sup> decision: *What to do when he discovered her pregnancy*

- a) As any logical, thinking person could tell you, there was only 1 explanation for this, despite what Mary was telling him ... he couldn't just ignore the situation
- b) Taking it seriously and divorcing her would prove his righteousness as a Jewish man .. he had every right under the Law to let her stand trial
- c) But his choice also proved his love and compassion for her welfare, by not exposing her to public disgrace
- d) So a quiet divorce was his compromise between honor for his own values & compassion toward the one he loved

But even this choice came at a great cost – the sacrifice of his marriage ... sacrifice of all his dreams for his life together w/ Mary ... he was seeing his dreams vanishing

### 2. But there was a 2<sup>nd</sup> decision he had to make: *How to respond to the angel in his dream*

- a) In the dream, God's message was clear: Go ahead and marry her
- b) But it was still up to Joseph whether to obey the dream or not: he did so unquestioningly, and this, too, showed his righteousness
- c) So he took Mary to live with him as his wife:

What a step of faith that was! By marrying her, he was accepting what some people would call "damaged goods"

By marrying her, he took her shame upon himself ... tarnishing his own reputation

- d) And there is one more thing to note about how Joseph responds to that dream: *By marrying her he accepts paternity for the child*

Joseph assumes full public responsibility for a child he didn't father! He is asserting that no matter how the pregnancy occurred, the child is authentically his

This was rare back then, and although it's not unheard of these days, with all the delinquent dads in our society, it doesn't happen very often today, either.

**C. Summary:** Joseph trusted God even though doing so seemed a riskier plan, a plan that just plain "didn't make sense"

1. If we're honest, many of us, had we been in Joseph's shoes, might have ignored or denied that dream altogether & just gone ahead with the divorce ...
2. Or worse, in a world today where people routinely say, "You made your bed, now sleep in it" ... some of us might have angrily turned Mary over to face justice by the law
3. And yet in perhaps the biggest decision of his life, Joseph is swayed not by logical analysis of this crisis, but by a dream!
4. He dares to believe God's promises for the future, even at the risk of his own good reputation.

**III. Something similar happened in the 1989 Hollywood film, "Field of Dreams"**

**A. For those of you under 40 or who don't like movies or sports & never heard of this film, here's a summary of the plot:**

Kevin Costner plays an ordinary man who leaves his wife and child at home and brings the family farm to the point of foreclosure with the bank ... all in order to pursue a crazy dream.

He dreams of building a beautiful lighted baseball diamond out in the middle of his Iowa cornfields. He is carried along by a mysterious voice that whispers to him, "If you build it, they will come." He hopes to coax an appearance at the field by the ghost of his late father's baseball hero, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, who was a legendary Chicago White Sox player.

**B. What does this have to do with Joseph and Christmas?**

1. Much as in the movie, Joseph of Nazareth also dared to believe in an outlandish dream being fulfilled in his lifetime ... a dream fulfilled through him
2. In essence, God in our text today, was also telling Joseph, "If you build it, he will come."
3. I almost imagine God's words to Joseph sounding like this:
  - a) *"If you build your family around Mary (whom I've chosen as blessed among all women), this special child she is bearing WILL COME.*
  - b) *When you marry her, Joseph, the messianic line of David will continue through you.*
  - c) *That long-awaited Messiah will come to save your people from their sins, and everywhere this story is told, they will remember your faithfulness, Joseph."*

#### **IV. Our Advent season prepares us for the joyous coming of that baby Messiah, **but it also reminds us of the important parts that Jesus' parents played leading up to this story****

**A. We are accustomed to paying a lot of attention to Mary's role of faithfulness and humility in the story, and rightly so ... **But we owe a lot to the extraordinary risk-taking faith of a simple carpenter from Nazareth who went about God's work of restoration.****

#### **B. Our theme today is God's restoration being at hand ...**

1. Restoration is very prominent in the words of the reading we heard from Psalm 80 ... Do you remember that refrain?

*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.* (Ps. 80:3, 7, 19)

2. But God's restoration also appears in Luke 1, with Joseph being a powerful agent of restoration ... How?

a) 1<sup>st</sup> Joseph restores Mary back to life by not pressing charges against her, which could have had her put to death for adultery

b) Then Joseph restores Mary back to dignity, by his willingness to quietly divorce her rather than publicly disgracing her

c) And then Joseph also restores his own family name and the lineage of David to greater honor by obeying the angel in the dream ... by choosing to marry this pregnant young woman and accepting paternity of the child, Joseph assures that his ancestor David's line will indeed produce the Messiah!

#### **V. Let me try to bring this back to our world today ...**

##### **A. Do we like John Bartel have faith enough in God's possibilities to build something good out of disaster?**

1. Do WE have faith enough to build something new or risky that might usher in Jesus' presence for our own situations?

2. Do WE trust God enough to build different or unfamiliar tents that Jesus would be proud to dwell in?

##### **B. Dear Waterford friends, do we have enough faith to build**

1. ... Christmas celebrations where giving outshines receiving?

a) ... where our own immediate family & close friends are not the only ones benefitting from all our Christmas spending ... where strangers and the needy also know God's love through us?

b) *If you build it, he will come.*

2. ... Holiday observances where the meaning of Christmas is measured not in the quantity or newness of things, but in the quality of relationships and time spent with significant people?

a) *If you build it, he will come.*

3. Do we have enough faith to build home lives that are visibly centered at least as much around Jesus Christ as they are centered around TV, the internet, ballgames, rehearsals, civic groups and a zillion activities that keep us distracted from God at work?

a) *If you build it, he will come.*

4. ... tangible practices of support for vulnerable persons in our local community?

a) What if the incoming national government follows through on its promised actions against refugees and immigrants? Will Christian churches be left flatfooted if families are torn apart and the local economy suffers with a loss of workers?

b) There is a movement being organized by some local churches and people at Goshen College to be prepared to support threatened Latino families with practical forms of assistance

There may be a time coming soon when we comfortable Christians can show solidarity with our Latino brothers and sisters by signing up to be called on to provide transportation, or childcare, or assistance with school expenses, or immigration legal expenses for the most vulnerable of our neighbors ...

Would we dare put actions of solidarity behind our words of solidarity?

This movement is called Elkhart County HOPE Network (Helping Our People Everywhere) ...

It is still taking shape & pastors and Mission & Service Ministry Team are discerning if or how God is calling some of us at Waterford to get involved

c) *If you build it, he will come.*

## VI. Conclusion

### A. Clarifying something ...

1. To be sure, Joseph in this story was not the sole agent of restoration for humanity

a) The impact on the world of Joseph's choices of faith were not the result of his own actions alone.

b) Without Mary's faithful response of "let it be with me according to your Word" we would not be preparing now for such a great celebration

c) Without the miraculous conception of that baby by the Holy Spirit, there would be no Christmas

2. We will not and cannot build God's kingdom just by taking great leaps of faith all on our own.

Text: Ps. 80: 1-7, 17-19; Matt. 1:18-25

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**B. However, sometimes Jesus' coming depends in part on gatekeepers like Joseph (& like you ... & me)**

1. Jesus keeps coming to us, but sometimes he comes quicker and more clearly when we act in faith to open the door
2. Such acts of faith often take us out of our comfort zones, maybe even risking our pride and our reputations
3. Look around you ... God's restoration is at hand.
4. *If you build it, he will come ...*