

Out of Step

Matthew 1: 18-25

Out of step! Anyone who has ever seen me on the dance floor knows I speak with authority on the subject of being out of step. Those who are aware of my theological perspectives and biblical interpretations are probably also aware that I tend to be out of step with most preachers you hear. I'd like to say a word on behalf of being out of step.

There is good biblical support for being out of step – being out of sync with most people in the culture of any particular time. Mary was out of step. She was pregnant before marriage. Betrothal was a sacred commitment, but it was not marriage. She and her intended were not living together and the betrothal arrangement did not allow physical intimacy of any kind. Mary was pregnant and faced the certainty of shame in her village and the very real possibility of being put to death.

Mary clearly was out of step, but so was Joseph. He had planned to do an honorable thing. Despite the inevitable conclusion of betrayal and faithlessness by Mary, Joseph resolved to break off the betrothal quietly and allow Mary some options. Was Joseph impressive? Yes. Was his action noble? Well, yes, but the truth is that Joseph was really anxious. He was scared. We know he was scared because the angel tells him not to be afraid. Joseph was afraid to take Mary as his wife. What would others think? They might well think that he too had broken the betrothal agreement by sleeping with Mary. He was afraid to buck the system, counter the culture, and risk the shame. “Don't be afraid, Joseph. Take Mary for your wife. The child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. You are to name him Jesus. He will save his people from their sins.”

Then the Gospel writer says something interesting, a bit of theological interpretation: that all of this was actually a fulfillment of prophecy -- “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, God is with us.” Mary was out of step. Joseph was out of step. The writer of Matthew's Gospel was also out of step. He did not realize, or maybe just didn't care, that the original Hebrew word used by Isaiah meant a young maiden without specific reference to sexual experience. Isaiah was speaking of an unnamed young woman of his own time who would give birth to a new king of Israel.

The writer of Matthew's gospel used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. He probably did not speak Hebrew and when he quoted the text Isaiah – “Behold, a young maiden will conceive” – he mistranslated it “behold a *virgin* will conceive.” As you can tell, that translation makes a big difference in how Isaiah is understood. It is clear that Matthew's intent is to transform Joseph's perception that Mary's pregnancy was a major problem into a realization that God was present in the situation – that something very good was happening and Joseph's action would be key. I don't believe the Christian Church has been well served by its insistence on a virgin birth as proof that Jesus was God's Son. It is, actually, more helpful to hear the angel's words in Joseph's dream as being intended to ease his fear, to reassure him that he should marry Mary.

Mary was out of step. Joseph was out of step. The writer of Matthew's Gospel was out of step. Incredibly, after all this being out of step and out of sync, we witness an amazing synchronicity, a remarkable grace in this story. When Joseph woke up, he acted on the angel's message despite his fear. He took Mary to be his wife and she gave birth to Jesus.

We at Crossroads Church often pride ourselves on being counter cultural. We like "stickin' it to the man" We like "marching to the beat of a different drummer." In the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the soon-to-be parents of Jesus were out of step with their own culture. We watch them defy conventional wisdom and even common sense to follow what they feel is God's calling. Jesus himself, in his life and teaching, was constantly out of step with his culture. He pushed boundaries following his own vision. He stepped on more than a few toes through his attitudes and actions. His words irritated some, ruffled some feathers, made some angry, and downright offended some. In some sense, being out of step cost Jesus his life, yet in a greater sense, he had already given away his life to the journey of following a pathway, the vision he saw.

How curious that the institution that has grown up around the followers of Jesus, the Church -- tends to encourage so much conformity. In some settings, individuals are expected to march in absolute lock-step with those in authority. Do you ever feel out of step? Is that ever a good thing? We who follow the Christmas child grown to be a man – teacher, healer, and savior – we *need* to be out of step at times. We *need* to color outside the lines. Walking faithfully in the Spirit, on the journey, makes it inevitable that we will blaze at least a few new trails in our lives. Author Elizabeth O'Connor has written:

the persons who would step out of the crowd and follow their own destiny must keep before them the knowledge that the way is hard. But even if they are aware of this, they are still in danger. They must remember also that few find it. It will grow easy for them to imagine that they are on the way when they are not. This is where the religious lose out on the Kingdom. They assume that because they are aware of the two ways, and because they have chosen the second, they are on it. This is to fall comfortably into the sleep of the crowd again. It may well be a religious crowd, but it is nonetheless a crowd.

(Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*)

Crossroads Church came into being as a crowd – lots of people sharing the common dream of giving birth to a community of faith. As often happens, innovations turn into traditions and comfortable ways of doing things. Too much comfort has the capacity to stunt a community's growth. That is always a danger. This congregation has struggled its entire life to find a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation. Being on this pathway has required a lot of stepping out and choosing not to do things the way most churches do them.

Your willingness to push the envelope was one of the traits that attracted me to Crossroads. I have chosen many pathways that are different and a little less well traveled in my life. This journey we have chosen to walk together is hard. It is hard work to stay awake, to live life paying attention, and to choose our own destiny. Even when we stumble, however, this remains the path we have chosen.

Here at Crossroads, we advertise ourselves as a place for people to ask questions and to think for themselves. I hope we will continue to be such a place in the coming year. We follow a person whose life flowed against the general current, not counter-cultural for its own sake, but to be in sync with the Spirit. I encourage each of you, and us as a congregation, to live your life this next year at least a little out of step with our culture so that we can dance in step with God.