

## **Jon Hauerwas – December 23, 2018 – “Homage” Matthew 1:18-23**

In 1997, Earlonne Woods was in his 20s when he was convicted of attempted robbery and began serving a sentence of 31 years to life in the San Quentin State Prison. <sup>1</sup> Last year, Woods began co-hosting a podcast about life behind bars which now reaches a wide audience. And, last month, California Governor Jerry Brown commuted Woods’ sentence, “saying he had demonstrated his commitment to turning his life around and leaving violence behind him.” <sup>2</sup>

Asked by an NPR host about what it was like to walk out of prison on November 30th, a free man after 21 years behind bars, Woods equated his feeling that day to a child dancing the floss. <sup>3</sup> Now, I don’t know if you are familiar with the dance that he’s talking about, so I’ve asked some volunteers to come forward and demonstrate. If there are any children or youth who would like to come up to the chancel and show the congregation what the floss is, then please come forward at this time. I should also note that while I don’t mind embarrassing myself in front of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/20/678815058/earlonne-woods-ear-hustle-co-host-celebrates-first-holiday-since-his-release-fro>. Accessed December 23, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

large groups, I also have no rhythm whatsoever. So I will just be an observer today, as well.

Please join me in thanking our volunteers. You may take a bow and return to your seats. (*Round of applause*). According to Earlonne Woods, that is what startling and unexpected joy and freedom look like. And I imagine that this is what the birth of the Messiah looks like, as well. This is the feeling that we are anticipating on Christmas morning. But we aren't there yet.

As Matthew tells it, Mary and Joseph are engaged. In those days, an engagement “was a binding arrangement between people already legally considered husband and wife.” Such a commitment “could be dissolved only by death or divorce.” “Unfaithfulness was considered adultery.” And, yet, Mary is pregnant.<sup>4</sup>

“Joseph becomes aware of the pregnancy before he learns the cause.”<sup>5</sup> According to the Law of Moses, capital punishment was required in such cases. And while rabbinic practice had mitigated the penalty by Matthew's time, the punishment

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<sup>4</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 134.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 9.

remained severe and humiliating.<sup>6</sup> This is why it is so important that Joseph is said to be a “righteous” man.

Given his devotion to the Jewish faith, it was not at Joseph’s discretion to forgive Mary, his beloved, and act out that forgiveness by consummating the marriage.<sup>7</sup> So he chooses to act in the most merciful manner that he is able. “His immediate response is to divorce her. That is, it is not out of anger that he resolves to terminate the relationship but out of deep religious conviction. No matter how much he still loves Mary, it is his religious obligation to annul the marriage contract, because she is apparently guilty of unfaithfulness.”<sup>8</sup> And while Joseph “must divorce her in order to demonstrate that his love for God is stronger than his love for Mary, he determines to do it secretly, so as not to cause her public humiliation.”<sup>9</sup>

But, the call of God is often startling and unexpected. “Three times Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream, and three times he must *do* something.”<sup>10</sup> Joseph hears and obeys the command to remain with Mary. And when the child is born, he names him Jesus, “accepting him as his own and adopting him into the Davidic line

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

as an authentic son of David.”<sup>11</sup> That Jesus was a common name in first century Palestine is “a sign that unites him with the human beings of the world rather than separating him from them.”<sup>12</sup>

In the example of Joseph, we find one who, when his whole world appeared to be crumbling, is “already living the heart of the law and not its letter, already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom. In a difficult moral situation, he attends to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his previous understandings of God’s will in favor of this word from the living and saving God.”

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When Earlonne Woods was still a resident of San Quentin, he had 15 minutes to make a collect call at the holidays. He recalls that each year, when his mother would answer the phone, she would spend about five of those 15 minutes praying. He admits that he really wanted to speak with her, and hoped that her prayer would end quickly. But, instead, he just sat there, listening, without interruption, as his mother prayed for God’s favor on behalf of her son.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 134 – 135.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Friends, what does it mean to give homage to God? What does it mean to set aside everything else in the pursuit of faithfulness? And what does it mean to hope? Jesus is coming. Let the dance begin.