

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, 2019

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Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

Why We Need Joseph

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife. – Matthew 1:24



Holding Heaven by Ron DiCianni

A reading from Matthew's gospel, chapter 1:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us."*

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together:

Speak to us, Lord, for we are waiting and watching for your arrival. Speak to us in our longing and in our rejoicing. Speak to us of hope and courage, speak to us of love. Amen

Linda Loving is a Presbyterian pastor. Isn't that a great name? Pastor Loving. I have another pastor friend named Pastor Miracle. Really. I guess you could say their ministry was predestined. Anyway, Linda has a niece named Megan. A few days before Christmas, when Megan was about four, she was sitting at the kitchen table, busy with her crayons drawing a picture of the Bethlehem stable. She stayed with the project for a long time, and when she finally finished, she proudly showed the picture to her aunt, carefully explaining each figure and character -- the shepherds and sheep, three wise men and their loaded camels, even a cat and a dog. At the center, of course, were Mary and the baby.

Linda immediately noticed someone was missing. “Where’s Joseph?” she asked, assuming Megan would realize her error, and sketch him in. Instead, Megan gave her a look of exasperation and answered, “Oh, who needs Joseph anyway?”ⁱ

On the one hand, the little girl has a point. Joseph doesn’t have any lines in the Christmas play. Instead he stands solemnly and inconspicuously in the background. There’s also less about Joseph in our Christmas music, the visual arts, and literature. But thank goodness for Ron DiCianni (dee-cee-onni) who painted the stunning portrait of him with Jesus on our bulletin today. I’ll admit that Joseph is rarely center stage in God’s salvation story, but he’s crucial just the same. We need Joseph. No man on Earth played a greater role in Jesus’ growing years. “Though Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father, he adopted Jesus as his son. Joseph protected him, provided for him, taught and mentored him.”ⁱⁱ In many ways Jesus is just like him! In a minute I’ll show you what I mean.

Looking at Joseph can help us discover more about who God is and who we ought to be in light of it.

So what do we know about him? Later on in the gospel Matthew tells us that he was a carpenterⁱⁱⁱ or, more precisely, a builder. He was engaged to a girl named Mary. In those days an engagement was a legally binding agreement between two families. It required a divorce to break the engagement. When Joseph learned that his fiancée was pregnant, he knew for certain that the baby was not his.

Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man, so he made plans to divorce Mary quietly. Joseph probably figured that a quiet divorce would bring the least amount of suffering and shame on both of their families. But as New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa points out, that really wasn’t much of a solution.

“Joseph’s ostensibly generous remedy for the ‘problem’ of Mary’s pregnancy would have devastating consequences for Mary and her baby. ... She would give birth without a husband in a society in which a woman’s social standing and economic sustenance depended almost entirely on her location in a man’s house. Her child would have no father in a society in which the father’s name constituted one’s identity.”^{iv}

Suddenly, Joseph’s plan seems less righteous. So what exactly does Matthew mean when he says that Joseph was “a righteous man”? You can also translate that same phrase, “He was a just man.” It means that he was known in the community as someone who was scrupulous about keeping the Law. And in this situation the Law of Moses was clear – take her out and stone her to death, along with the man if he can find him, and so *purge the evil from Israel*. (Deuteronomy 22:22.) But here’s the surprise -- Joseph was a just man, a righteous, law-abiding man who breaks the law. Yep. He does.

It must have been awful for him, a terrible choice. Will Willimon says that if Mary *was blessed among women*, Joseph was embarrassed among men. The sacred promise that formed his life had been broken. As a righteous man he would have been compelled to do what the Bible said to do – publically announce her disgrace and leave her, or worse. Instead he chose to lie, disregarding

everything that he was sworn to uphold. He reminds me of something Dr. King said in his Letter from Birmingham Jail. That, “one who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.”^v It took tremendous courage and moral integrity to do what Joseph did.

You have to wonder if this is where Jesus got the idea that it was all right to heal and to glean on the Sabbath. Those were against the law. So was telling the woman caught in adultery to *go and sin no more*.^{vi} When Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son – likening God to a merciful, forgiving father, I wonder if he had the image of his own earthly father in mind.

We know that Joseph was human, as fallible and flawed as the rest of us. Matthew says that *when he resolved to do this*, that is divorce Mary, the root of that verb “resolve” means be angry or enraged.^{vii} It’s the same word Matthew uses in chapter 2 when he says that, *Herod was infuriated* when he realized that the Wise Men had tricked him.

Joseph was mad as fire. He had had every reason to be. His honor and reputation had been betrayed, his sense of justice trampled. He was infuriated, but when it came time to act, he didn’t let his anger control what he did. He chose compassion. That is important for all of us, folks. Joseph didn’t let what happened change who he was. Stuff happens. People treat you unjustly; they betray you. You and I cannot control how we feel, but we can control what we do with our anger. Paul wrote, *Be angry but do not sin*.^{viii} There is always a choice. Joseph was a great role model for Jesus, and for us. Jesus got angry too, but never acted out over the way that he was personally treated. Jesus’ anger always had to do with the mistreatment of others. Have you noticed that? ...particularly the young and the vulnerable. When Jesus endured the suffering and humiliation of the cross, when he could have called down the wrath of God on his persecutors, instead he prayed, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*.^{ix} I wonder how much of that grace Jesus learned from Joseph.

Something happened to Joseph along the way. Somewhere between fury and faith Joseph learned to listen to his angels. My guess is that it wasn’t easy for him. The carpenter/builder/contractors I know are pretty matter-of-fact people. Most don’t take easily to messages from God delivered by mysterious heavenly beings. But Joseph listened when God spoke to him in his dreams. No Jew would have missed the fact that God spoke to his ancestor and namesake Joseph the patriarch the same way. Remember Joseph...the one with the amazing Technicolor dream coat? Joseph listened.

The angel said what angels always say, *Do not be afraid*. That’s an important message for us too. Fear cripples our compassion. Fear ruins our ability to act as instruments of God’s hope and peace. Harvard’s Peter Gomes said, “Fear, not sin, is the curse of human life that debilitates us and keeps us living timid lives.”^x

Joseph listened to his angel say, *Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife ... she will bear a son and you will name him Jesus*. We don’t know how Joseph recognized this as a message from God, but thank God he did! In art we usually depict angels with great, flowing robes and huge wings, but in the Bible, most of the time, angels look like ordinary people. So the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews can remind us never to *neglect to show hospitality to*

strangers, for in so doing some have entertained angels unaware.^{xi} In the Old Testament Abraham and Sarah don't recognize their guests as angels, and Daniel, the prophet, speaks to the angel Gabriel (same one who talked to Mary) and refers to him as *the man*.^{xii}

Joseph's angel will speak to him three more times, telling him to take the infant Jesus and his mother and refugee to Egypt to save his life. While they are in Egypt Joseph will hear the angel speak a third time saying that Herod is dead...it is safe to return to Israel. And then, in a fourth message the angel will tell Joseph not to return to Bethlehem, and so the little family will settle in Nazareth.

Adam Hamilton, an author many of you love to read, said, "In order to see angels, I think you have to have a bit of an imagination, openness to a different way of seeing. You have to perceive something that others might not be able to see."

Christmas is all about letting our imaginations run free. It's one of the reasons we say that Christmas must be experienced with the heart of a child. But this story is more than that. It's also about a man and a woman of grit and grace, character and courage. Both Mary and Joseph said "yes" to God when it would have been much safer to say "no." We are all the direct recipients of their priceless gift.

I want to close with a scene from one of my Christmas favorites, the 1947 film, "The Bishop's Wife." Loretta Young plays the title role and David Niven is her husband, an Episcopal bishop struggling with the burden of a huge capital campaign that is devastating to his spirit and his family. He prays for God's help and God sends an angel played by Cary Grant – to help him. There's one scene where the angel, whose name is Dudley, dictates into a typewriter and magically produces the bishop's Christmas Eve sermon. Now that's an angel I want to meet!

In this scene the bishop rises to share that sermon with the congregation, one that *he thinks* he wrote.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzRUZYI8XdU>

"Tonight I want to tell you the story of an empty stocking. Once upon a midnight clear, there was a child's cry. A blazing star hung over a stable and wise men came with birthday gifts. We haven't forgotten that night down the centuries; we celebrate it with stars on Christmas trees, the sound of bells and with gifts.

"But especially with gifts. You give me a book; I give you a tie. Aunt Martha has always wanted an orange squeezer and Uncle Henry could do with a new pipe. We forget nobody, adult or child. All the stockings are filled...all that is, except one.

"And we have even forgotten to hang it up. The stocking for the child born in a manger. It's his birthday we are celebrating. Don't ever let us forget that. Let us ask ourselves what He would wish for most. And then, let each put in his share, loving kindness, warm hearts, and a stretched out hand of tolerance. All the shining gifts that make peace on earth."^{xiii}

I think it's safe to say that the gift Christ wants from us this Christmas is the same gift he received from Joseph – faith and trust. He wants to enter our lives in a way that turns our lives, and our cherished assumptions, and our world with all its terrors, upside down, or rather, right side up. He is the way, the truth and the life.

To help us with that God chose Joseph, the carpenter, a good and righteous man who believed. Let's keep Joseph. We need him -- this Christmas and throughout the year.

ⁱ Linda Loving by John M. Buchanan, from a sermon "Joseph" preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, December 12, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Faithful: Christmas Through the Eyes of Joseph* Abingdon, 2017, 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 13:55

^{iv} ibid

^v Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from the Birmingham Jail, 1963

^{vi} John 8:11

^{vii} Kenneth E. Bailey, "Joseph and Three Shocks in the Christmas Story" *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 21, 2006

^{viii} Ephesians 4:26

^{ix} Luke 23:34

^x Peter Gomes by Samuel Lloyd, III from a sermon preached at Trinity Church Boston, December 24, 2015

^{xi} Hebrews 13:2

^{xii} Daniel 9:21

^{xiii} From *The Bishop's Wife*, produced by Samuel Goldwyn, 1947