



Unsung Servants

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 4th Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. Readings: Isaiah 7:10-17; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; and Matthew 1:18-25.

At this time of year, much attention focuses on the nativity, and the Madonna and child. Today provides an occasion to pay tribute to Joseph. The genealogies of Matthew and Luke tell us much about the ancestry of Joseph. Some are people well known to us, and some unknown. The great kings David and Solomon we know. We know Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is Rahab, the woman of Jericho who sheltered Joshua's spies, and who made it possible for our ancestors to enter and take possession of the Promised Land. And there is Ruth the Moabite who cared for Naomi, and became the mother of Jesse and grandmother of King David. Others named in the genealogies are largely unknown.

Scripture is full of references to unsung servants of God. I think, for example, of the wife of Noah. We're never told her name. And yet, surely, she deserves some recognition. Can you imagine for a moment what it must have been like to live with that man? The neighbors are going about their business day in and day out, going to work and caring for their families. And all the while, your spouse is building this enormous thing in your back yard, so many cubits by so many cubits, with three decks, which he stocks with every kind of food imaginable. Now, how do you explain this to the neighbors? And then – and then, he starts bringing in all these animals, two by two – which can't have pleased the neighbors. And then, when it starts to rain, he closes his family into this ark -- together with all the animals?! And, who tended them do you suppose? Who supplied them with straw? And who do you think fed them? Who got up in the night with the crying puppies? Worse, who cleaned up after them? Just who do we suppose swept out this ark?

Joseph is another such unsung servant. Sometimes he isn't even mentioned by name. In Matthew's text, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Here it is Joseph who deals with the unexpected and disruptive intrusion of the Holy Spirit into his nicely-planned life. In Matthew, the whole miracle rested on Joseph's shoulders, awaiting his decision to accept or reject the stunning news of an impending Messiah - and the scandalous way in which this salvation would enter the world. It was one thing to read and venerate the prophets and quite another thing to have one's own betrothed suddenly become the one chosen to carry this child of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus was twelve, you may recall, his family went to Jerusalem for Passover, and they discovered on the return trip that Jesus was no longer with them. After searching for a day, they returned to Jerusalem, and after three days they found him in the temple “about his father's business” he says. But no where in this tale is Joseph mentioned by name.

We know Joseph was not a young man, and scholars speculate that he may have died before Jesus reached adulthood, which may account for his absence from the later narratives. Nonetheless, scripture is not entirely silent. As we heard this morning, Matthew tells us, “The birth of Jesus took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.”

As a child that bothered me. Now, this matter of being with child of the Holy Spirit has been the subject of much debate in the church for 2000 years or so. That is not what troubled me as a child. What bothered me then was that Joseph was going to divorce her. Worse, we’re told this was because he was just, and because he was unwilling to put her to shame. Well, whether or not it was just, it never seemed very charitable. So, while I was glad that he decided not to embarrass her, I would have liked some compassion from Joseph.

As so often happens though, there is more to the story. Joseph is a devout Jew, of the house and lineage of David, and by the provisions of the Covenant Code he was to turn Mary over to the men of the city to be stoned to death on the doorstep of her father’s house. In other words, the penalty was capital punishment.

Given that context, Joseph suddenly emerges in a very different light. Long before any divine intervention, well before the angel of the Lord appeared to him in dreams, Joseph had already determined to spare her life. For a devout Jew this is highly unusual. And yet, to spare Mary’s life, to save her family from humiliation, and to spare the life of her child, he simply resolved to divorce her. One could hardly blame Joseph if he felt deceived or betrayed, but we have no indication of that. We only know what he did.

So now, imagine Joseph having to go to Judea, to the city of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. It’s not enough that he has to be enrolled just then for the census, and to have to arrange for his taxes with a baby on the way. But he has to go to Bethlehem to do it – a long and dusty journey. And Mary is with child, feeling like a beached whale we might suppose, gritting her teeth and grumbling as she is jarred up and down on the back of an ass, day after day, in the final week of her pregnancy. And there is nothing Joseph can do about it.

When they arrive in Bethlehem, Joseph searches for a place for them to stay – and there is none. And there are no women to assist with this first birth, no mothers, sisters, cousins, or midwives. Mary and Joseph are tired, discouraged, and dusty from travel, scared and alone. The time is near, and the urgency mounts and the only shelter is a stable.

This stable does not look like the clean and carefully decorated crèches of our churches and pageants. This is a real stable with life-sized animals and pungent odors, where the manger which holds the straw is probably the cleanest thing around, and perhaps the best that can be said for it is that this family probably has more privacy than they would at any inn in town.

At last the child is born, and who do you suppose assists with this delivery? Joseph, a first-time father now has a grouchy, red-faced infant to contend with, while he tries to figure out

what in heaven's name you do with a swaddling cloth. And who is there to make Mary comfortable? At long last, we can imagine that Mary and the baby sleep. Joseph can wrap himself in his cloak and settle in for the night – when what to his wondering eyes should appear but a crew of shepherds with mangy sheep and barking dogs, all tumbling in through the stable door in search of the new born child. Surely, the patience and fortitude of this man deserve to be commended.

And then there is the visit of the magi. Here is Joseph, in less than satisfactory accommodations, far from home, with no means of offering hospitality, graciously greeting a party of exotic and learned Persians the likes of which he has never seen. And if that isn't enough, they present to the infant son of a poor carpenter and a teenage mother gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. What would *you* do with such gifts?

The evangelist tells us that once again Joseph is visited in a dream, and the angel of the Lord appears and says to him, "Arise, and take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Any thoughts or plans Joseph had of returning home again are now shattered. They can no longer go home to share their news with their families, or show them the baby. Abandoning home and possessions, Joseph relinquishes the only life he has ever known to protect his family, and to lead them to safety in a land he has never seen. As they fled for Egypt in the dead of night, what do you suppose they did with the gold, and frankincense and myrrh? Were they too much to carry? Did they give this little family the means to establish themselves in a foreign land?

We don't know. What we do know is that the birth of the Messiah was not a new idea in the mind of God, but one that had been in preparation for a long, long time. The angel said to Joseph, "Do not be afraid," reminding him that his son was named seven hundred years earlier. Luke tells us that at the circumcision "he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." We know that God was constantly present in the life of Joseph and his family, protecting them from Herod and the slaughter of the little children, leading them to safety, calling them out of Egypt, and sending them home to Nazareth in time.

Like both his heavenly and earthly fathers, the Christ who enters our lives in this season comes to protect us from evil, to lead us to safety, to call us out of exile, and to lead us to our heavenly home.