

"Joseph: The Forgotten Man of Christmas"

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Matthew 1:18-25

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.

Jesus had two Dads, didn't he? He had his Heavenly Father, and he had a relationship with his Heavenly Father that is a model for us. Even if we can never imagine while on this earth having the depth of intimacy with God that Jesus enjoyed, he still invites us into that intimacy by giving us a prayer to pray that starts out, "*Our Father who art in Heaven.*" - Our Heavenly Father.

But Jesus also had an earthly Father, and what a man he was. Last week we looked at the Amazing Mary - so full of faith and confidence at such a young age. Today, let's spend a few moments reflecting on the Forgotten Man of Christmas, Joseph.

Last night Alisa was putting out one of our Nativity sets and she said, "Which one is Joseph?" We looked at the set closely and it was impossible to distinguish Joseph from the Shepherds. It's that way with many

Nativity sets. Joseph just doesn't stand out at Christmas. There are very few Christmas songs about him. I can't think of any Christmas carols where he's mentioned on his own. Occasionally he's coupled with Mary in a song, but never does he stand on his own. So let's give him his due today.

Can you picture Joseph, young carpenter - strong and rugged with a kind, handsome face? Can you picture him walking down the street with the love and joy of his life, Mary? The older translations point out that they were "betrothed." In ancient Judaism there were 3 steps in the marriage process. 1 - the Engagement. 2 - the Betrothal. 3 - the Marriage Ceremony

The Engagement often happened when the couple were very young, sometimes what we would call school age. Often this was arranged by the parents or by a Matchmaker - "*Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Match . . .*"

One commentator said, "*Marriage in ancient times was held to be such a serious step that it should not be left up to merely the whims of the heart. They believed that some rational thought should go into it.*" (how quaint)

The next step was **the Betrothal**, which was a ratification of the engagement. Prior to this point the engagement could be broken if the couple did not want to go through with it. But once they said yes to betrothal their relationship was binding. In fact, it could only be ended by a Writ of Divorce. During this time the couple was known as "*husband and wife*," though they did not live together and they were not to consummate the marriage. The betrothal period lasted one year. That's where we find Joseph and Mary - betrothed. They had agreed to their engagement. Mary was probably around 16 or 17 years old. Joseph was maybe a year or two older. Picture them again walking through their village. Joseph, so proud of his bride to be, saying to people, "*This is Mary, my WIFE!*" And she holding on to his big strong arm proudly, beaming from ear to ear. If Norman Rockwell had lived back then he would have painted their picture for the front cover of the Saturday Evening Post.

But suddenly this picture was shattered. Mary is pregnant. Joseph knows the facts of life, and he knows the facts of their relationship. He knows that he is not the father. I've often thought about how overwhelmed Mary must have been - in shock and disbelief. But Joseph must have been just as overwhelmed. His world had just come crashing down upon him. Every dream, every hope he ever had about their life together was now smashed to pieces. How you ever had that happen to you?

I spoke this past Monday at the Senior Center of North Andover. It was a delightful and engaging time. I knew I wouldn't recognize a lot of people there, so I decided to start my talk by reminding them of a few of the things we all have in common. If you're above age 50 like me there's a pretty good chance that like most people who get mail from the AARP you've known your share of heartache and disappointment. You've known dreams fulfilled and dreams shattered. You've discovered that life is difficult and challenging, perilous and precious all at the same time.

But Joseph isn't getting mail from the AARP. He not been long on the adult path of life. This is no doubt his first bump in the road, and what a bump it is. Can you imagine the anguish and outrage he felt? The embarrassment of it all and most of all the sense of betrayal.

In those days unfaithfulness could be punishable by death. You'll remember the woman brought to Jesus who was caught in the act of adultery and some folks were set to stone her. Betrothal was a legal status and an affair was considered adultery. So, Joseph had a choice:

- He could have her publicly shamed and stoned, or
- In the presence of two witnesses hand her a writ of divorce.

Verse 19 says, *"Joseph being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."*

That tells us a lot about Joseph right there. In fact, the word used to describe Joseph is not often used in the Bible - He was a *"righteous man."* The Greek word here for righteous has a rich, full meaning. It means that outwardly Joseph obeyed the laws of God. He did what was right in God's eyes. But the word also implies that his heart matched his deeds. Not only were his actions God-like, but his heart was God-like as well. The word implies kindness, gentleness, empathy and mercy. And you see that in his decision - *"He resolved to divorce her quietly."* I so admire Joseph for this quality. He erred on the side of mercy, not harshness. And I like that such behavior is called, *"righteous."* We're sometimes led to think that the opposite is true - that harshness is more God-like.

Well, of course there's another unexpected twist in the story. God intervenes. And Angel tells Joseph that this is all part of God's plan. And that God is up to something big. I love the timing here - just at the point where Joseph thinks his life is completely falling apart, God sends

an angel to remind him that God is still in control.

It's like a tapestry. You know if you look at a tapestry from behind you can't always recognize what it's a depiction of. You can make out some shapes and colors of course, but you really don't see the glory of the picture or design, and there's lots of dangling, uneven threads hanging down. My life is a lot like that, isn't yours? I can recognize some patterns but there's a lot of loose ends and the complete picture is far from clear. What is God up to here? What road am I on and where is it heading?

The story of Joseph is a helpful reminder that God is the great artist of life and we can trust that God is making something beautiful out of our lives when we place our lives into God's hands. God surely was with Joseph and Mary. And I love how Joseph could receive this message from God even though he was in great pain.

For an illustration of this think of a carpenter who hits his thumb instead of the nail. You can't expect a lot from that carpenter at that time. He's not likely to be very calm, level-headed or spiritual. He's in too much pain. Well, here's Joseph the carpenter and he's in a lot of pain, but he can still hear from God. That's a good goal for us as well.

Last week we said that our Savior was very blessed to have Mary as his Mother. We can also see that Jesus was very blessed to have Joseph as his earthly Father. Jesus grew up with a righteous man as his Father.

- Someone who knew that Kindness and Gentleness are doorways to God.
- Someone who walked in God's ways both inwardly and outwardly.
- And someone who had a Deep Faith, so much so that he could be spiritually sensitive and in tune with God even in the midst of turmoil and pain.

That's a pretty good combination.

May God make us more like Joseph. For he was a righteous man.

Amen.