

Thank You, Joseph! **Matthew 1:18-25**

At this time of year we focus on the Babe of Bethlehem and upon his mother Mary. But we never focus on Joseph. I hope Matthew's version of the Nativity is rediscovered within us, because if there was ever a male figure whose contributions and faithfulness have been shunted off to the side, it is Joseph.

How is Joseph really remembered? Usually we recall that he is the guy who almost dumped Mary when she became pregnant before they were formally married. Other than that, Joseph is depicted as little more than the man on the Christmas card leading the donkey bearing the very pregnant Mary enroute to Bethlehem.

Do we ever pay attention to Joseph when we view the manger scene? No. He's just there, standing in the background among the animals. Even the smelly shepherds enjoy a more prominent place in the scene than does Joseph. And is there any less prominent role in the Christmas pageant than Joseph? Mary holds baby Jesus and looks radiant. The shepherds adore. The angels sing. Wise men bring gifts. Even the little kids cast as sheep usually get to make some animal sounds. Joseph only gets to stand there. He never has any lines. The spotlight never swings over to him. Obviously, Joseph, in most of our eyes, is a highly peripheral figure in this beautiful story.

Well, as radio commentator Paul Harvey used to say, "Now, for the rest of the story." And the rest of the story comes from our reading of Matthew's gospel. Thank God for Matthew! He is a wonderful counter-illumination to the traditional Nativity story we have in Luke's gospel.

We need to make sure we understand what is happening in Matthew's birth story of Jesus, because the words "betrothed" and "divorce" are mutually exclusive in our Western culture. How can you divorce someone to whom you are only engaged and not yet married? In ancient times, a Jewish marriage occurred in three stages. First, there was the engagement, which was a contract arranged by the families. Often, the man and woman to be engaged didn't even know each other. Second, there was the betrothal, a one-year period wherein the couple was known as belonging to each other, but not yet having the rights of living together. Third, the wedding itself occurred at the end of the one-year betrothal period. The only way the second betrothal stage could be terminated was by divorce.

Joseph and Mary were in the second stage of the one-year betrothal, when Mary told Joseph she was with child by the miraculous act of God. Suddenly, Joseph is confronted with his betrothed being pregnant, and he didn't do it. Imagine what Joseph felt at this news – humiliation, rejection, and betrayal. Christian preacher and author Max Lucado wrote, "Joseph was caught between what God says and what makes sense." As Joseph assessed the situation he had two choices. He could publicly accuse Mary of adultery and then watch her be stoned to death, which was the prescribed penalty for that offense. Or, he could quietly settle it with a divorce. Joseph did not throw an enraged fit and cast Mary out, because he loved her. And because he loved her, he did not want to humiliate her, so he took the second option, resolving to just quietly divorce her.

But God intercedes. In verses 20 and 21 of our passage, two beautiful verses, an angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream and says to him, "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." And Joseph believed! This, for me, is the first great act of faith in the New Testament. Joseph not only put down the stone of revenge, he picked up the mantle of compassion and understanding.

The significance of what Joseph did cannot be overstated. There was a moment when the entirety of God's messianic plan rested in the hands of this simple man, Joseph, who was completely free to accept or reject what he was hearing from both Mary and God's angel. Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back through Joseph's side of the family, establishing Jesus as the "son of David" and the "son of Abraham" by virtue of his legally being Joseph's son, thus fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah

would come from the house of David. Thus, we see the importance of Joseph's role in this magnificent drama. If Joseph had carried through with his original resolve to quietly divorce Mary, not only would Jesus have been illegitimate in the eyes of the culture, but according to Matthew, he would also have been denied the validity of Davidic heritage.

When Joseph awakens from his dream encounter with the angel, he displays complete trust and obedience. He takes Mary as his wife and then refrains from sexual intimacy with her to preserve the remainder of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. It is only through Joseph's complete acceptance that every facet of the Christmas event was able to come to fulfillment. Joseph was able to push through his torment. The most difficult time to hear God is when the cries of our own personal pain drown out all other voices. Yet, that is precisely when God does come to us. Joseph listened to God's instruction in the midst of his own personal chaos.

Joseph is described by Matthew as a righteous man. He was certainly that, but he was much more. He was a quiet man of love and he was responsive to the will of God. If only we can listen to God's voice the way Joseph did. We owe Joseph our deep gratitude and thank you. Alongside Mary, he was the first New Testament figure to hear and unreservedly accept the word of God. In so doing, he enabled the great messianic mission to be properly fulfilled. It is a shame that over the centuries we have relegated Joseph to little more than a wooden prop in the drama of the Incarnation.

Following the birth of Jesus, Joseph led his family to Egypt to avoid the evil of King Herod. In Egypt and then in Nazareth, Joseph shared with Mary in the rearing of Jesus into manhood. By Jewish tradition, the father educated the children. Joseph was the one who taught Jesus to read and write, and educated him in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. As an adult, Jesus frequently quoted from the Bible. Those were the verses he first heard from, and read with, Joseph.

Joseph also taught Jesus the trade of carpentry, at which Jesus became proficient. Legend has it that Jesus was known to be the finest ox yoke maker in Galilee. Men would bring their team of oxen to Jesus. He would carefully measure the animals and then make a hand-hewn yoke to precisely fit that team. In his ministry, Jesus became known as the Carpenter from Galilee.

Contemporary Christian writer Ron Klug wrote a piece entitled *Joseph's Lullaby*. It portrays Joseph as I like to think of him as a person. Joseph is speaking in the stable following Jesus' birth.

Sleep now little one. I will watch while you and your mother sleep. I wish I could do more. This straw is not good enough for you. Back in Nazareth I will make a proper bed for you of seasoned wood, smooth, strong, well-pegged, a bed fit for a carpenter's son.

Just wait till we get back to Nazareth. I will teach you everything I know. You will learn to choose the cedar wood, eucalyptus, and fir. You will learn to use the drawshave, ax, and saw. Your arms will grow strong, your hands rough – like these. You will bear the pungent smell of new wood and wear shavings and sawdust in your hair.

You will be a man whose life centers on hammer and nails and wood. But for now, sleep, little Jesus, sleep.

Are you torn? Do you want to believe God knows you and cares about you? Do you want to believe you are not alone in the world? Do you want to believe you are following God's will for your life? But in your mind it just doesn't seem to add up? If so, then you have a kindred spirit in Joseph. Mary's story had to have sounded bizarre, absurd and unbelievable to Joseph. Yet he did believe. And in believing, he didn't just do something for Mary and Jesus. He did something profoundly wonderful and important for us. He modeled for us how to respond to God's sudden and unbelievable activity in our lives.

To God we can only say, "Thank you for loving us so much that you gave us your only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life." [John 3:16]. And then we can also say, "Thank you, Joseph. Thank you for showing us how to love and accept God's miraculous presence in our lives." Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 25 December 2011