

Palm Harbor United Methodist Church
Rev. Sharon Patch
December 13, 2020
JOSEPH'S STORY
MATT. 1:18-25

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. During these weeks of Advent as we prepare ourselves for celebrating the birth of Jesus, we are looking more closely at how it came to be. On the first Sunday of Advent we looked at the story and song of Zechariah. It was easy for me to identify with Zechariah and Elizabeth because they were senior citizens and I could just imagine what it would be like as a senior citizen to be told that you were going to have a child. No....no...no! Not because I'm pregnant, just because I'm old. Anyway, we learned that the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah and told him that he and Elizabeth, who after all these years of longing for a child, would have a son and he would become the one to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. They were told to name him, John. It was easy to imagine their joy. When the baby was born and Zechariah held him in his arms, he broke into a song of praise and worship.

Last week on the second Sunday of Advent, we heard Mary's story and when she was greeted by her cousin Elizabeth who acknowledged that Mary was indeed carrying a very special child, Mary broke into song. A song of praise and rejoicing. It was easy for me to identify with Mary because she was a young girl when she was visited by the angel Gabriel and was told that she was going to have a baby. I was also a young girl when I was told I was going to have a baby, but it was a doctor and not an angel who told me. And my son had an earthly father. Yet, I, too, was filled with joy but also with anxiety at the prospect of becoming a mother. So, it was easy to imagine Mary's anxiety and her joy.

This morning we are going to be delving into Joseph's story. Now, Joseph doesn't have a song. Apparently, fathers don't break into song when they are filled with joy. Have you ever noticed that fathers are assigned supporting roles and rarely starring roles. They are just there to lend a hand and they often appear somewhat inept when it comes to babies. When it comes to bringing a baby into this world, they are there to coach and hold the wife's hand and try not to pass out or cry. Well, I guess that's about all they can do. That's still better than when I was having my children, back then fathers were confined to the waiting room of the hospital. They were not permitted anywhere near the labor and delivery area. Their first view of the baby was through a glass nursery window. At least today they get to experience up close and personal all that it takes to bring a new little person into this world.

It is a bit hard for me to imagine how Joseph felt when he discovered he was to become a father and what it was like to be there when Jesus was born. I've never been a father. So, I've asked Joel Figueroa, our Student Ministries director, to come and share with us what it's like. Joel and his wife, Clare, just became the parents of a beautiful baby boy, Luka. Joel tell us what becoming a father was like for you.

(Joel speaks.)

Now, I think after hearing Joel's story and seeing his joy and excitement at becoming a father, we have a better sense of what Joseph experienced. Of course, Joseph's story is a bit different. While Joel and Clare had already gotten married and were looking forward to having children, Joseph and Mary were just engaged to be married and had never lived together.

The scripture says Mary was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Now, let's go back and just imagine for a minute what Joseph must have felt when he heard that the young woman he had pledged to marry was already pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father.

If this were to happen today the man would just ask for his ring back and walk away. Engagement in Joseph and Mary's day was much more binding. The engagement could only be broken by divorce. An engaged woman was called "wife" even though they had not actually gone through a wedding. So, Mary is called Joseph's wife and he is called her husband.

Well, when Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, the scripture says that he decided to divorce her quietly. He would sign the necessary legal papers but he would not have her judged publicly and stoned. He was compassionate and did not want to expose her to public disgrace.

Mary and Zechariah had both been visited by the angel Gabriel. We don't know the name of the angel who appeared to Joseph but the message was the same. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. While the story Mary told him about how she became pregnant might have seemed far-fetched, the angel assured him she was indeed pregnant by the Holy Spirit and she was going to bear a son. The angel even told him to name the baby, Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins.

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew even explains that all this has taken place to fulfill the words of the prophet, Isaiah.

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel"

Well, when Joseph awakened he did what the angel had instructed and took Mary as his wife. Can you imagine the relief Mary must have felt when Joseph didn't divorce her. Let's hear Mary tell the story.

(INSERT VIDEO – Mary's story)

Mary was so very grateful for the way in which Joseph responded. This is no hearts and flowers love story, it is a much deeper kind of love. This is a love that honors commitment. He loved her and believed her and had faith in her and he fulfilled his commitment to her, and became a father to her child.

Have you ever seen a painting of Joseph holding the baby, Jesus? I haven't. Few, if any, exist. The famous artists of old painted glorious paintings of Mary and baby Jesus with haloes over their heads. Yet, they never seem to think Joseph worthy of being painted even without a halo. I'd think a couple of pictures of Jesus sitting on his earthly father's knee would be nice. Apparently, the artists didn't recognize the important role Joseph played.

Joseph gets little attention in the Christmas story, it's almost like he's just an extra. Yet, if it had not been for Joseph, Mary likely would have been stoned to death. If it had not been for Joseph and the fact that he was descended from King David, Jesus might have been born in Nazareth instead of Bethlehem...remember they went to Bethlehem because it was the home of Joseph's ancestor, David. This was where Joseph had to go to register for the census. The whole Christmas story would have lost its connection to the prophesy of Isaiah.

I can't imagine what it was like for Joseph to be chosen to be a father to Jesus, the Son of God. Joseph must have been pretty special on his own for God to choose him for this important role. I'm sure God chose Joseph to be Jesus' earthly father because he was trustworthy and a

righteous man who was worthy of this very important job. I can imagine that Joseph as a father was just as proud of Jesus as Joel is of Luka. I can imagine that when he learned that the king was going to try to find the baby and destroy him, he was angry and frightened and just as he had protected Mary, he was determined to protect baby Jesus. So, he scooped up his little family and took them to safety in a distant land.

I can imagine that he taught Jesus how to select the best wood and the best stones to use for building and how to build with integrity and honesty. I'm sure he taught him about faith in God.

So often, we fail to give fathers like Joseph the recognition and appreciation they deserve. Today fathers are encouraged to bond with their newborns. They are reminded that they are to share the parenting responsibilities. They are not just breadwinners, they, too, are role models. They are reminded that they are to protect their sons and daughters and teach them the important lessons of life. Like Joseph, fathers are to bear witness to their faith. They are invited to show their emotions and to love deeply. Being a father was no easy task in Joseph's day and it is no easy task today. On this third Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of Joy, we recall the joy that Joseph must have felt knowing he had been selected by God to be Jesus' earthly father.

Joseph's story is not long but it is critical to the story of Jesus' birth. Without Joseph, Mary's story might have ended with stoning. Jesus might never have been born, and our salvation might not have been secured. So, let us give thanks to God for Joseph, who became the earthly father to God's one and only Son.

LET US PRAY.