



The Voices of Advent:
“JOSEPH” (Living Love)
Matthew 1:18-25
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Four Sundays in December: Today we come to the fourth sermon in a sermon series titled *The Voices of Advent*.

We started with Zechariah, who along with his wife Elizabeth, occupies center stage in the first chapter of the gospel according to Luke. We heard the angel Gabriel bring the astonishing news to Zechariah: Elizabeth will bear a child. When Zechariah voiced doubt that such good news could be true, he was hushed, hushed by an angel, until after John's birth. John, Jesus' cousin; John the Baptist was born. Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and Luke, chapter one, ends with his soaring monologue that is referred to as the song of Zechariah.

Two weeks ago, the focus was on Gabriel. Gabriel, the angel who spoke to Zechariah, speaks to Mary six months later. Gabriel, who in both cases brings surprising news of new life, of birth, and who also speaks the phrase that comes to us time and time again from God's messengers: Do not be afraid. Be not afraid. Powerful words that continue to speak to us.

Last week, the focus was on Mary, the mother of Jesus. The scripture was Mary's song, the Magnificat, the words of Mary that give voice to the hopes and dreams of those so often overlooked in her world and ours. Mary's voice is the song that scatters the proud, puts down the mighty, exalts those of low degree, and fills the hungry.

The voices of Advent: Zechariah, Gabriel, and Mary.

Which brings us to today. The fourth Sunday in Advent. The day before Christmas Eve. And our focus is on Joseph.

Did you hear Joseph's voice in the scripture I just read? There were no words attributed to Joseph in our reading for today.

If you read all four gospels, this is what you will discover: while the other major players in the stories of Jesus' birth get major speaking parts, we have no record of Joseph ever saying anything. In the gospel accounts, Joseph is silent. And today, Joseph is the focus of our sermon series titled *The Voices of Advent*. Yea....

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Now, I suspect Joseph was capable of speech. I can imagine the conversation he had with the innkeeper when he and Mary arrived in Bethlehem: “*What do you mean there’s no room at the inn? I made these reservations a month ago! I’ve got a pregnant wife sitting out there on a donkey in the parking lot! Sleep in a stable...*”

But these words are not recorded, nor are other words of Joseph recorded, so today we look for Joseph’s voice not in what he says but in who he is and what he does. In doing so, I don’t want to suggest that words don’t matter. They do. Words matter. Words can hurt. Words can heal. Words can create fear. And words can bring hope. Words do matter.

What we say in word and song makes a difference. But our values, our dreams, our passions, our faith, and yes, our righteousness is also expressed through who we are and what we do. Words do matter. But words alone are not always enough.

During December, you can hear and read passionate pleas for the greeting “Merry Christmas” to be used rather than “Happy Holidays.” We need to keep the Christ in Christmas, the Christmas in our December greetings.

I understand the passion around such pleas. Using words to name Christmas as the holiday we celebrate is important. And we can do this while still respecting those who celebrate other holidays. We need to keep the Christ in Christmas, the Christmas in our December greetings. But words, words alone, are not always enough.

So, who is Joseph? And what does he do?

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While we don’t know a whole lot about who Joseph was, we do know some things. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life (13:54-56), when Jesus returns to Nazareth and offends people with his teaching, the people said about Jesus, “Isn’t he the carpenter’s son?”

The Greek word translated as carpenter is *tekton*, someone who worked with wood. Most of the homes in Galilee were built of stone or mud brick. A *tekton*, a woodworker, would have built the shutters and doors for homes, and likely furniture and farm tools. In Greek there is a second word, *architekton*, from which we get the word architect. An *architekton* was a master builder, someone who would have had others working for him. Joseph was not an *architekton*, but a *tekton*.

We get another hint of who Joseph was, or at least his status, in the account from Luke’s gospel of Mary and Joseph’s presentation of Jesus in the temple. According to the law of Moses, the sacrifice presented at the purification ritual of a first-born son is a year-old lamb and a young pigeon or turtledove—unless one is poor, in which case a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons is acceptable, which is what Mary and Joseph presented when they brought Jesus to the temple.

Joseph was a basic carpenter, not a master builder. And he lacked means. The family qualified for the reduced rate sacrifice.

God needs someone to be Jesus' earthly dad. God doesn't choose a priest or an educated lawyer or scribe. God doesn't choose someone who has status or wealth. God chooses Joseph, a humble carpenter of moderate means.

It makes you wonder about God's judgement... If God chooses someone as ordinary as Joseph to raise God's own child, then what would prevent God from choosing, from calling, you, or you, or me to do God's work?

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Matthew's account of Jesus' birth begins with these words: *Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child...*

In Mary and Joseph's day, marriages were arranged by the parents. Engagements could last a year or two. Significant monetary gifts were exchanged, with money going from the groom and groom's family to the bride's family. Legal documents were signed in which the groom made certain binding promises to care for his bride. This all happened before the actual wedding ceremony and before the bride and groom would be, as we say, together.

Which brings us back to the scripture for today: *Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, Mary was found to be with child...*

Can you imagine the conversation?

"Ah, Joseph, I'm pregnant."

"Another man?"

"No. God. An angel explained it all to me, there's nothing for you to be concerned about."

According to Adam Hamilton, author of a book on Joseph many in our congregation read this month, "The first person to doubt the virgin birth—or what is more accurately called the virginal conception—was Joseph. And he was hearing about it from Mary herself!" (Hamilton, 48-49)

The hymn we sang a few minutes ago, "What Child is This?"—I wonder if Joseph's thoughts were not inspiration for the title.

There is another sermon, or at least a good long discussion, that could be developed around the place of doubt in faith and whether the virgin birth is a statement of biological fact or theological truth.

But for now, my point is simply that I think Joseph—the ordinary person God chose to be the father of God’s child—had some doubts. But doubts are not disqualifying for being used by God for God’s purposes.

I said earlier that we find Joseph’s voice in who he is and what he does.

The news that Joseph received from Mary was devastating. Joseph undoubtedly felt betrayed and humiliated. Once Mary became visibly pregnant, people were going to talk. So, what does he do? According to the rules of his day, he was to go to the priest or into the public square and declare what had happened and why he was breaking off the engagement. To do this publicly would be to call Mary out as an adulteress. She would be publicly scorned and humiliated. The Law of Moses (see Deuteronomy 22:20-21, 23-24) stipulates an even harsher penalty: she could be stoned to death, the penalty for adultery.

It doesn’t appear that this penalty was practiced much in Mary and Joseph’s day. But even if Mary were not put to death, she would be considered a sinner in her community, a harlot. And she would be viewed this way from that time forward.

Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man. There were those—and still are those—who associate righteousness with rule following. To be righteous is to keep the rules, to maintain the tradition. According to such a definition of righteousness, the course for Joseph to follow would be that prescribed in the law.

But our text for today says that Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly. He would say he had changed his mind about the marriage. The sums of money given to Mary’s family would not be returned. As it became evident that Mary was pregnant, people would assume that Joseph was the father and that he had a change of heart after being intimate with her. He, not Mary, would be the dishonorable party in the relationship. He would take the blame. He would accept the stigma and shame for himself rather than allow Mary to be forever disgraced. Mary’s dignity would remain intact. No one would be put to death. All this is implied by those few words in Matthew’s Gospel: “Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.” (Matthew 1:19)

What does it mean to be righteous? Is righteousness about rules and maintaining them? Perhaps not. Perhaps righteousness is about relationships and mercy, love and grace.

In Matthew 12, Jesus is confronted with the same questions when a man with a withered hand seeks healing from him on the Sabbath. Is righteousness about rules and maintaining them? Or is righteousness about relationships and mercy, love and grace?

In John 8, a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus. The law is clear. She is to be stoned. Is righteousness about rules and maintaining them? Or is righteousness about relationships and mercy, love and grace?

Joseph’s voice? We hear it in what he does. Joseph had every reason to doubt Mary’s story. He had every reason to believe that he had been wronged, that his fiancée had been unfaithful.

Despite his pain and the dishonor his choice would bring him, he made a choice that says mercy and forgiveness, love and grace.

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And then, the story gets interesting...

“But, as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...”

And this is what I wonder: If Joseph had acted according to the rules, would he have dreamed? Or would he have slept the sound sleep of the certain?

When we move beyond certainty, to risk because we believe in relationships, to act with mercy, to live love, to be grace... When we move beyond certainty, are our spirits more open to dreams, to messengers, to God?

Joseph’s dream with which the scripture for today concludes is but one of four dreams through which God speaks to Joseph.

After he showed mercy to Mary, Joseph dreams, and in his dream he receives a message from God. It is remarkable how consistent God’s messengers are. Among the first words out of the messenger’s mouth are “Do not fear.” They are the words that Zechariah and Mary heard from the angel Gabriel. They are the words that persons who have experienced near death experiences have reported to me sensing or hearing as they hovered between this life and the life to come. They are the words that Dr. King spoke on the night before his death, when he spoke of having been to the mountain top. (Martin Luther King)

Joseph dreams. And he is told that he should not divorce Mary, but take her as his wife and name the child Jesus, which means “God saves.” And the child named “God saves,” Jesus, will be called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.”

And here is what is amazing. Joseph believes the dream and acts on it. One commentator I read this week observed, “Joseph is in touch with his inner self in a way that would make modern therapists proud.” (Morgan)

Joseph dreams...and he listens to the messengers of God.

Do not be afraid. God saves. God is with us.

Joseph does not speak. But who he is and what he does speaks to us.

Joseph does not speak. But he dreams. And in his dreams he hears God speak.

Do we dare dream? Do we dare to dream? To not be afraid. To believe that we do not have to save ourselves, but that God saves. To believe that we are not alone, but that God is with us. Do we dare to believe the dreamers among us, who invite us to live here on earth as if God’s reign has begun?

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Four Sundays in December. Four voices of Advent: Zechariah, Gabriel, Mary and, yes, Joseph.

Merry Christmas. Words. Words have meaning. They can hurt. They can heal. They can harm. They can bring hope.

Merry Christmas. What might it mean for us to say it not just with our words, but with who we are, what we do and, yes, how we dream?

Amen.

References

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