

December 3, 2017

Advent #1 Joseph

Isaiah 7:10-14, Luke 2:1-5, Matthew 1:18-25

Adam Hamilton writes, "It is one of western civilization's best-known stories. For two thousand years it has been told and retold, preached and sung about. It has been represented by the titans of art and by the purveyors of mass-produced lawn figures. We celebrate it every year with Christmas trees and lights, with gifts and cards, carols and hymns. Even if you did not go to church growing up, you're probably familiar with the story. You know the locale - a manger in Bethlehem. You know the cast of characters - Mary and Joseph, the angels and shepherds, the wise men and King Herod. You may know plot details - pregnant girl, census, the long journey, the overcrowded inn. And yet, as is often the case, the story's very familiarity may keep us from fully grasping its riches. We think, "Well, yes, I know that story," as its depth and nuance escape us. There is much more to the Christmas story than meets the eye. There are details we may have missed entirely."

We all know the story... But what does it mean for us today? How is it supposed to change our lives, make us think or act differently? That is what we are going to look at for the next five weeks.

(2) Take a look at a Nativity set. Around the Christ Child you (usually) see four people or groups: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men. Each week we will look at one of these characters and find out what commitment they made to one another and to God. Just as they all surround and are centered in Christ, we too are centered around Christ.

(3) Today's character is Joseph. Who was Joseph and what commitment did he make?

We don't know a whole lot about Joseph. The book of Matthew tells us that Joseph was related to King David. The book of Luke tells us that he was a carpenter. Beyond that we do not know anything about Joseph, so we have to read between the lines to fill in the picture of Joseph's life.

(4) Orthodox and Roman Catholic scholars tend to see Joseph as an older man. Probably a widower with other children. Protestants see Joseph at a young age, perhaps 15, typical of the marriage age at the time. How does Joseph's age

change how you see the Christmas story? Mary pregnant, and Joseph at 15 years old, walking for 10 days to Bethlehem. Or Mary pregnant, and Joseph at 93 years old, walking for 10 days to Bethlehem.

(5) Matthew tells us that Joseph finds Mary to be pregnant outside of their marriage. This is a sin punishable by death. Joseph decides to break off the engagement quietly. Joseph knew that after he ended the engagement, everyone would soon discover that Mary was pregnant. They would naturally assume that Joseph had gotten her pregnant and then broke off the engagement. The shame would be his, not Mary's.

Before there was any divine explanation, Joseph chose mercy. He did not act out of malice. He could have demanded a resentful condemnation but acted out of love.

(6) We know that the story continues and an angel of the Lord came to Joseph and tells him to take Mary as his wife and that the child was conceived from the Holy Spirit. So Joseph awakens and does as the angel of the Lord commanded.

(7) Joseph responds with obedience. Joseph's commitment is obedience.

Imagine for a moment, what would have happened if Joseph had walked away that day and left Mary pregnant and alone...

If Joseph had been less obedient, Mary and Jesus may not have survived. We would have no Christmas story. In fact, we would have no Christmas... no Easter.

Mary is very important to our Christmas story, but do not overlook the silent Joseph.

It is true that no one ever prays, "Hail, Joseph, full of grace. The Lord is with thee." Joseph doesn't have a book of the New Testament named for him. He has no title of honor. None of his words are preserved in Scripture, and he is only mentioned a handful of times in the Bible. But perhaps this is precisely the lesson we're meant to learn from Joseph. He was a simple, humble man who did what God asked. Joseph was a man of humble service and obedience.

So what are we to learn about Joseph and his commitment? How are we to live like Joseph?

(8) Let's go back to the story for a moment. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. I find it interesting that, after calling Joseph's name, the first words the angel speaks to Joseph are "Don't be afraid." Imagine that as a conversation starter!

It's kind of like when I begin a conversation with my husband and the first thing I tell him is, "Don't be mad, but..." It's a cue that whatever I tell him next will give him good reason to be mad.

Joseph probably got that same feeling of apprehension when the angel began with "Don't be afraid." When God calls you to do something and the opening words are "Don't be afraid," you likely *should* be afraid! Whatever follows is sure to be outside your comfort zone. It may be a call filled with challenge and risk. In fact, sometimes God will call us to do the thing we absolutely do not want to do.

Why did the angel tell Joseph not to be afraid? It wasn't that Joseph might fear the angel itself. The message really was this: "Don't be afraid of this mission to take Mary as your wife and to raise this child as your own."

The challenge of doing so must have made this humble carpenter anxious or fearful. He was being given a mission to wed Mary and to trust that the child was of God. But more than that, Joseph was being presented with a mission of raising this child who "will save his people from their sins." Don't be afraid, Joseph. God's saving plans for the world are being entrusted to your care! Don't be afraid... yeah right!

(9) Some call Joseph an adoptive father, because for all intents and purposes he did adopt and raise Jesus as his own. Some see him as a stepfather, since he was Jesus' father by marriage. Some might even call him a foster father.

The mission given to Joseph was to raise this boy as though he were Joseph's own. It was to love him, protect him, mentor him, teach him, and guide him. It was to model for this child what it meant to be a man- a man who honored and served God.

Some of you may be step parents, foster parents, or adoptive parents. It is not an easy job. It requires you to reach out with extraordinary love, patience, kindness, and gentleness. It is not an easy job, but one that is being entrusted to you.

Thus Jesus became Joseph's family. Jesus was accepted. Jesus was protected. The angel commanded Joseph to personally name the child. This is deeply significant as it means that Joseph, in naming the child, acknowledges him as his own son and thus becomes the legal father of the child according to Semitic law.

Could we be as obedient as Joseph?

(10) Not all of us are in a position to become foster or adoptive parents. All of us, though, are called to act in the spirit of Joseph and help care for and build up children who are not our own. When you think about it, many of us perform this work in our own particular ways. Some teach Sunday School, passing along spiritual values to the children of others. Some coach. Some volunteer as tutors, Big Brothers or Big Sisters. Some are aunts and uncles, neighbors, or friends. Many of us serve like adoptive parents to the circle of friends of our children. All of us are called. Each of us can make a difference.

Can we be as obedient as Joseph?

(11) So why am I preaching a message about Joseph? Joseph isn't flashy. He isn't the central part of any narrative. He doesn't say anything... not a single word! He's an ordinary guy who's just doing his best to live an honorable life- faithful to God and his family.

That's why. That's why, this Christmas season I am preaching about Joseph. Because, metaphorically speaking, most of us are more likely to find ourselves quietly leading a donkey over an uncertain path, wondering what the future might hold, than standing on a ridge, leading nations.

(12) Thus Joseph, like Mary, shares in the work of redemption. And so do we. If we are willing to be obedient like Joseph, to love God and neighbor, to raise, care for, and build up any child around us... we take on and continue the saving work of Jesus.

Will we be obedient like Joseph? Without Joseph there is no Christmas.

Will we be obedient like Joseph? To do what the Lord asks of us? To go outside our comfort zones? To be family to others. To help a generation become who God is calling them to be? Will we be obedient like Joseph? Amen.