

**Matthew 1:18-25
Creekside COB
December 19, 2004**

“The Carpenter Who Saved Christmas”

When I was young, I loved helping decorate our home for Christmas. It was fun hanging ornaments and tinsel on the tree. I liked putting the electric candles with the orange bulbs in the windows. But my favorite Christmas decorating ritual was assembling the manger scene. It sat on the coffee table in the living room. Being in a "high visibility" area, the nativity cast had to be assembled with care.

My arrangement changed from year to year. One year I put the cows and sheep up close with the shepherds and wise men behind them. The next year the people got the front row and the livestock behind them. There was never a question about where to put Jesus. He was always in the center, snuggled asleep on the hay, flanked by Mary and Joseph. This is the way most folks arrange their nativity tableaus.

Placing Mary and Joseph to the left and right of the manger suggested equal importance for them both. But paintings by religious artists of the Middle Ages put Joseph on the fringes, outside the natal glow that enveloped Mary and her baby. In some paintings you must look hard to find him. He does not look like a beaming father passing out cigars, saying, "It's a Boy!" He is in the half shadows with bewildered look. Artists often portrayed Joseph as a balding old man, old enough to be Mary's grandfather. He is last mentioned when Jesus was twelve. If he was old to begin with, the strain of raising God's son was probably more than his old heart could take.

Mary gets the attention. When Gabriel told Mary she had found favor with God and would bear a son, she broke into singing the Magnificat. Someone said, "Mary may have been blessed among women, but Joseph was embarrassed among men." Gabriel

spoke to Joseph in a dream and he slept. When the children's department puts on the Christmas pageant, the boys fight over who gets to be Joseph because there are no lines to memorize. Neither Matthew nor Luke record a single word uttered by Joseph.

But even though no words are attributed to him, we know things about Joseph. He made his living with wood, not words. He was most at home in his carpenter's shop, sawing logs, planeing boards, and making dresser drawers and tie racks out of them. I see a sign above the entrance to his shop-- "Joe's Carpentry." He is hard at work. His beard is full of sawdust, and he's wearing a shirt with an embroidered patch above the pocket-Joe.

Joseph was a humble, quiet, and righteous man, and he loved Mary. He didn't know how she became pregnant. He only knew that it didn't involve him, and the only way to avoid public humiliation and spare Mary shame and possible stoning, was to divorce her-quietly, discretely. It was a painful decision, but at least they could get on with their lives and try to make the best of an embarrassing situation.

Mary agreed to be part of the plan, but Joseph's consent was necessary, too. He hadn't slept well since Mary broke the news. Come morning, he would file divorce papers. But as he slept, an angel leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary for your wife. It's the Holy Spirit's doing. She will bear a son. You will name him Jesus, and you will raise him as your own."

Think about it. The course of history hung in the balance, depending upon the answers of a teen-age girl and an aged carpenter. The angel's wings must have trembled as they delivered their messages.

What if Joseph woke and forgot the dream? What if he remembered it, but decided the dream was induced by the cold pepperoni pizza he ate before bed and not the voice of an angel, and come morning, proceeded to the courthouse to fill out the paper work? Who could blame him? Being "unfaithful" was

sufficient grounds for divorce, even if your spouse claimed it was with the Holy Spirit. Joseph's righteousness was expressed in a shocking way. He did not want to shame Mary. He loved her. The righteous thing to do was divorce her!

Several years ago a man phoned the church office and said he needed to talk. When he came for the appointment, he showed me a family Christmas photo of his wife, his four-year old son, and himself. Their friends had discussed amongst themselves that the son bore no resemblance to his father. One day his wife told him why. He was not the boy's father.

The revelation was devastating. The covenant between he and his wife had been broken, and the child he raised as his own flesh and blood, wasn't. The people he confided in told him to throw in the towel. But he couldn't do it. He asked if he was crazy, wanting to forgive his wife and stay in the marriage. Could he just stop loving the boy because he didn't carry his genes? Re-establishing trust was difficult, but it was what he and his wife were willing to do for the sake of their marriage.

I don't know if Joseph confided in his friends. His life had been settled. He would marry his bride. They would raise a family. He would provide for their needs. Then Mary detonated a bomb that blew Joseph's plans to smithereens. Then the second bomb. "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary for your wife. The child is of the Holy Spirit."

Despite all his reservations, Joseph said, "Yes... I'll take Mary. I don't know what it means to give God his 2:00 a.m. bottle and change God's diapers, but I'll do it. He was crazy, of course, but one person's craziness is another person's faith.

It's a wonder we let our children hear stories like this in Sunday school without parental consent forms. It was so embarrassing, and it was precisely in such a mess that God came into the world. Strange as it may sound, the Christmas scandal is our hope.

Tell me, with which personality in the Christmas story do you identify? Herod? I hope not. The wise men? I doubt it. The shepherds? Maybe, but not likely. Mary? The mothers among us might feel a bond with her, but it breaks down when you consider whom she conceived.

That leaves Joseph. You won't find a Christmas card with just him on it. Mary left the soaring poetry of the Magnificat. Joseph was no good at poetry. We don't hear a peep out of him. Joseph wasn't a speaker for a reason-- he was a doer who did as he was told.

He stood by Mary. He heeded the angel's warning and took his family to Egypt to hide from Herod. He obeyed the directive to return and settle his family in Nazareth.

This carpenter saved Christmas. He could have stopped it cold, but he was obedient to the word that came to him, and because of his obedience Emmanuel has been with us ever since. God's desires for the world were tied to Joseph's "Yes." The prayer in, "O Little Town of Bethlehem"... "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today," isn't just to be sung. It expresses our desire to help God continue being born in the world.

He was an ordinary man, as ordinary as you. God called him, just as God calls you. He was scared when the call came, just as we are afraid when in our sleep, or from out of the blue OUR names are called and we are asked to accept what seems an impossible task. But Joseph did as he was told because he believed God was with him, just as by his act of obedience we KNOW Christ is with us, and will help us do all things through him.

Twig's mother, Ruth, lives in Williams Center, Ohio, population, around one hundred. Most of her life she has belonged to the Asbury United Methodist Church, just outside her backdoor. On most Sundays there are about twenty people present. The members who are left are trying hard to keep the church doors open. There are no children or young families. They left years

ago for big churches with lots of programming. There is, however, one youth who remains. Her name is Sarah Miller. She is sixteen.

One Sunday Sarah stood in worship and said, "We need a Bible study." A life-long member responded, "If you want to study the Bible, come to Sunday school!" It is this thinking that hastened the departure of everyone under seventy. Then Twig's mother spoke with the authority for which Hemmenway women are legendary-"We NEED a Bible study." Sarah said, "I'll lead it." She was only fourteen at the time, and has been doing a great job leading it for the past two years. Period.

Last summer Sarah planned, recruited helpers, and directed Vacation Bible School. In a village of one hundred, into a church of twenty, Sarah brought thirty children for a week of Bible school. I wonder how many stood on the sidelines thinking, "It will fizzle." "She's sweet, but naive." "She's in way over her head." "We know. We've tried it before and it didn't work."

God is looking for avenues into the world, and as God needed Mary and Joseph to be born into space and time, God needs you to give birth to his light and love. Joseph had a role to play, and he played it well. Thanks to this humble, obedient carpenter who strove to do the right thing, Jesus was born, grew to manhood, fulfilled his mission, and is enthroned for all eternity in heaven, and no less in our hearts.

Let us pray:

In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian sea, the gracious calling of the Lord, let us like them (and like Joseph and Sarah), without a word rise up and follow thee. Amen.