

Matthew 1: 18-25  
Creekside COB  
December 30, 2007  
The First Sunday After Advent

### **“Noticing Joseph”**

Whether we are conscious of it or not, the way we decorate our homes for Christmas makes a theological statement. It is especially the case when arranging the manger scene. Growing up, the Nativity was my responsibility. At first, the placement of the holy family, shepherds, wise men, and oxen and asses didn't pose a challenge. It was a no-brainer.

Jesus went in the manger flanked by Mary and Joseph, and the rest of the figures went wherever. But as I grew older and paid more attention to the story, I put more thought into the cast of the nativity tableau. Mary and Jesus were at the center. The animals were there to begin with, and it was *their* space, so I put them close to the holy family. The shepherds were positioned next, and the wise men occupied the outer circle since they were the last to arrive.

As Christmases went by, one person became more perplexing to me -- Joseph. Who was he? What was his role? Was he necessary? Mary and Jesus took center stage, but literally and theologically, where did Joseph fit?

It is interesting to study how artists over the ages have portrayed Joseph. He looks significantly older than Mary. But in many of the paintings there seems to be a common treatment of Joseph -- he is just standing around. Sometimes you have to look close to see him standing where the circle of light fades to darkness. He leans on his staff or leans against a wooden post. His facial expression ranges from “blank” to “dazed and confused”. Most of the time, whether on canvass, or frescos, or mosaics, or icons, or stained glass, the Madonna and Child are featured, and poor Joseph is nowhere to be found.

It's not hard to understand why he gets so little attention. The gospels say precious little about him. Matthew and Luke tell us what he did, but not a word of what he said. Almost everyone got a speaking part in the story -- Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men and even rotten King Herod, but there is not a peep comes from Joseph. He made a living with wood and chisels, not speeches. This doesn't mean, however, that Joseph was a bit-player or just a prop in the Christmas story. This morning I hope we will gain a deeper appreciation of Joseph's role in bringing Jesus into our world, and in the process be able to confidently claim our role in the drama of discipleship.

Luke gave most of the attention to Mary. Matthew focused on Joseph, but even so we don't have much to go on.

The first chapter of Matthew is the genealogy of Jesus. It doesn't make for interesting reading. Its a tedious recitation of "so and so the father of so and so." The conclusion of the genealogy reads: "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, to whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

It was important for Matthew to show his Jewish readers that Jesus was a descendant of David, but the bridge between Joseph and Jesus is curious. Unlike the previous generations, Matthew doesn't say, "Joseph the father of Jesus." It says, "*Joseph, the husband of Mary to whom Jesus was born.*" Joseph's link to David was recognized, but not Joseph's fatherhood of Jesus.

Luke says that Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to be registered because "Joseph was a descendant of the house and family of David." What a distinguished ancestry. Practically speaking, though, it was like claiming to be a distant, shirt tail relative of the Getty's or the Vanderbilt's. Kings were in Joseph's ancestry, but he was just a carpenter.

The trajectory of Joseph's life was set. He was betrothed to Mary. Soon they would marry, have kids, and he would live out

his days as a carpenter, providing for the needs of his family. The future was laid out like plans for the houses he built. Every post was plumb, every corner was square. Then God got involved and blew Joseph's plans to smithereens.

Mary was pregnant, but the child wasn't Joseph's. The Law provided Joseph a way out this painful, shameful turn of events. He could divorce her, wash his hands of the whole mess and seek a more *suitable* spouse. Being a godly and righteous man, Joseph didn't want to expose Mary to public scorn and disgrace, so he resolved to dismiss her... quietly. He wasn't going to explain anything to any one. He was going to let everyone assume that he was the father. The burden of the public shame would be upon Joseph, not Mary.

Joseph went to sleep on this, and an angel spoke to him in a dream. "Stay with Mary. Make her your wife. The child she carries is from the Holy Spirit. You shall name him Jesus. He will be the savior of the world."

Joseph woke in a cold sweat and with a deluge of questions. "How are your families going to take this?" "*I don't know.*" "What are people going to think of you and Mary with a baby born out of wedlock?" "*I have no idea.*" "How are you going to explain what happened?" "*I don't know.*" "If the baby is God's son, how are you going to raise him?" "I don't have a clue. How am I supposed to know anything? I'm a little overwhelmed right now."

In a poem by W. H. Auden called, "*A Christmas Oratorio*," Joseph hears an angel voice his own unspoken thoughts:

*"Joseph, you have heard what Mary says occurred,  
Yes, it may be so. Is it likely, No.*

The voices returns:

*"Mary may be pure, but Joseph, are you sure?"*

Again, the voices come:

***“Maybe, maybe not  
But Joseph, you know what Your world will say  
About you anyway.”***

**Then Joseph cries out:**

***“How am I to know? All I ask is one and important  
elegant proof,  
That what my love has done was really at your will  
And that your will is love.”***

**The “overwhelmed” feeling was not going to leave any time soon. While Joseph tried to sort things out, he got hit by a decree from Rome. Everyone had to return to the place of their birth to register to pay taxes. So Joseph dutifully went with Mary to Bethlehem, the city of David, the place of his ancestors. After Jesus was born, things got crazier. Joseph was told in a dream to take Mary and the baby to Egypt because Herod was out to kill Jesus.**

**There is no record of what went on in Egypt, but years later the coast was clear and the family returned from Egypt and settled in Nazareth. There, Joseph resumed his carpentry work with Jesus by his side, passing on the craft to Jesus the way Jacob passed it on to Joseph. The next time Joseph was mentioned was when he and Mary took twelve year old Jesus to Jerusalem. After this, he disappears from the record.**

**It’s hard to imagine what life was like for Joseph from the moment Mary said, “Let’s talk, and I want you sitting down for this.” Life was so settled – then God messed it all up. Yet through it all, Joseph did everything he was told, though he had no clue of what to expect next. There was no promise of reward for being obedient. There was no promise that down the road things wouldn’t be so complicated. He didn’t know if he was a parent or a foster parent, but he knew he wasn’t in the running for the “Father of the Year” award.**

**It's easy not to notice Joseph. He didn't sing any songs like Mary. He didn't give any speeches. He did what he was told and did what he could to look after Mary and Jesus. When he wasn't taking them somewhere, he just stood around looking lost and wondering what was going on.**

**It is easy to focus on the other characters of Christmas and not notice Joseph, but we should start. Lots of people find it easy to relate to him. We don't like being the center of attention. We don't want to give speeches. Discussing theology isn't our thing. We quietly go about our lives, wanting to trust God more. We try to be faithful, though most of the time we aren't sure of what God wants us to do. We know what it's like to be dazed and confused, or at least uncertain. We just want to be a home for Jesus – a dwelling place for his love. We want to be informed by his Word. We want to love his people. By the way we live, we will hopefully make others curious and draw them closed to the love of the Lord. When we are successful at doing it, we're usually not aware of it, which seems to be the way God prefers it, and meanwhile we bumble and stumble along our way.**

***The Blood of the Lamb* is a novel by Peter De Vries. The main character is named Donald Wanderhope -- an appropriate last name for Joseph! Donald's young daughter, Carol, is dying from leukemia. One night he finds his way to a little Catholic church by the hospital. He lights a candle at the shrine of Saint Jude. In case you don't know, St. Jude is the patron saint of lost, hopeless causes.**

**This is what Donald Wanderhope prayed: Give us a year. We will spend it as we have the last, missing nothing. We will mark the dance of every hour between the snowdrop and the snow; crocus to tulip to violet to iris to rose. We will note, not only the azalea's crimson flowers... We will seek out the leaves turning in the little-praised bushes and the unadvertised trees...**

**We will note the lost yellows in the tangles of that bush that spills over the Howards' stone wall. When winter comes, we will let no snow fall ignored. We will again watch the first blizzard**

from her window like figures locked snug in a glass paperweight. *“Pick one and follow it to the ground!”* she will say again. We will feed the plain birds that stay to cheer us through the winter, and when spring returns we shall be the first out, to catch the snowdrop’s first little whisper in the wood. All this we ask, with the remission of our sins, in Christ’s name. Amen.

You know the expression, **“DON’T JUST STAND THERE...do something!”** Let’s turn these words and make a statement about ministry. **“Don’t just do something – STAND THERE!”** I mentioned that throughout history. Artists portrayed Joseph just standing there. We think that standing around accomplished nothing, but standing is where ministering to others begins.

It’s said that 80% of ministry is just showing up. It’s not the words we speak that make an impact upon people who are broken, hurting, distraught, or sick. It is not the experiences you have had, although sharing them may be appropriate. What makes the biggest impact on hurting people is the fact that you cared enough to show up and stand with them!

I heard a nun give an eloquent argument in support of the ordination of women as priests in the Roman Catholic Church. She said that the very first priest was a woman. During the Mass, the priest holds the bread and declares, **“The body of Christ.”** The priest offers the body and blood of Jesus to the congregation. The nun asked, **“Who brought the body of Christ into the world?”** Mother Mary, that’s who!

If Mary was the first priest, I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that Joseph was the first disciple.