

“Jesus’ Other Parent”

Matthew 1:18 – 25 (within the sermon)

Text: “Her husband Joseph being a just man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, . . .” . . . Matthew 1:19a

One of the familiar themes of the Advent is the role of Mary being Jesus’ mother. She is revered, honored, and, at least by some, worshipped. Taking a back seat, but nevertheless the parent from whom we can learn much, is Jesus’ other parent – Joseph, the carpenter.

Only Matthew’s Gospel gives Joseph much notice. Indeed, the Genealogy of Jesus which establishes that Jesus is in the lineage of Abraham and David ends with, “and Jacob the father of Joseph, *the husband of Mary*, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.” Luke only mentions him in passing, Mark overlooks him completely, and John’s Gospel simply writes: “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45). As a matter of fact, in the Gospel of Luke there is more material concerning the wise men and the shepherds than we find dealing with Joseph.

While the reasons are not clear, we only know that Joseph is but a bit-player in the largest drama of the Bible. Maybe that’s why Karl Barth’s response to questions about a theology of Mary was, “what we need is a theology of Joseph.” And Matthew’s Gospel provides that. As it deals with the scandalous nature of Jesus’ birth it puts Joseph front and center in the Nativity Story. And if you don’t think it was a scandal, I would add parenthetically that I saw a political cartoon recently that said “how do you suppose the religious right would deal with the Virgin birth?”

And as we shall see, thanks to Joseph, Matthew’s Gospel overcomes the scandal.

Matthew gives us some clues as to the character of this humble carpenter God choose to be the earthly father of God’s Son. And by examining this passage we may even find some clues as to the true meaning of Christmas. It may also help us get some clues as to the kind of upbringing Jesus might have received from His parents.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child . . . (pause) . . . from the Holy Spirit. (Mt. 1:18)

It is appropriate that Matthew picks up his birth narrative in this manner, after all, he just lead us through a genealogy that established a lineage from Abraham to Joseph – which is great; but let us remember that Mary was a virgin. So now, Matthew begins to help us through the scandalous birth.

Her husband Joseph, being a “just” man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. (Mt. 1:19)

1.) Joseph was a just man. It begins with a better understanding of what was at stake to this young couple. In ancient Palestine out-of-wedlock pregnancies were a far more serious issue than in today’s culture. Mary, as an unwed mother would face the full measure of Hebraic adultery laws. An adulterous unwed mother would have no status in those days – and her child would have even less status. Suffice it to say there were “no child left behind” or public welfare programs in those days for unwed mothers.

And we also need to understand what “betrothal” meant in those times. Betrothal was not an engagement in the modern sense. Betrothal was a definitive legal state, contracts had been signed, dowries exchanged, binding agreements set in place. While a legal marriage did not exist until the husband had taken his wife into his home and consummated their union, a betrothed couple was, never-the-less, a legal entity and already bound by the strict Hebraic codes of conduct. For example, if she, during her betrothal, had an affair with another man, it was regarded as adultery. But on the other hand, when a woman was betrothed, if she should be bereaved (or in this case “quietly dismissed”) by her “husband-to-be,” she would be considered a widow.

And it is here that we get a real sense of Joseph’s character. For if Joseph were a “righteous man,” which unfortunately is the word used in many of the Biblical translations, he would have fulfilled the Hebraic codes and let Mary face alone the Hebraic adultery laws. As a man of faith, **he** would have upheld the law, **he** would have done the right thing, **he** would have been revered in his faith; **but Mary** as adulterous and **her Son** as a child of an adulterous woman would have had absolutely no rights or entitlements in that culture. That would have been doing the “right thing.”

But Joseph wanted to do more than that. Joseph the carpenter clung to the hope that his family would survive. He married a teen-age girl, but not just any teen-age girl, but a teen-age girl who – to put the best possible spin on this, was “with child”. And then, to top it all off, took his powerless Son to Egypt. How easy it would have been for Jesus’ other parent to pack it in, go his own way and start all over. Joseph was trying to do the “just” thing.

Thankfully, however, Joseph choose to do more than the conventional, “right thing”. Joseph choose to do what was “right” – in this case to do what was “just” – as in justice. Instead of being “**righteous**” and only fulfilling the law, Joseph was “**just**”. Joseph overcame the scandal of the Christmas birth. Even before his dream and its encounter with the angel Joseph decided to “dismiss her quietly” – a euphemism to quietly “divorce” her so that instead of being an adulterous she would be regarded in that society with the same status as a widow. That meant that Mary and her son would be cared for by the community. So, for Joseph to maintain the betrothal status with her throughout the birth when he found out that she was pregnant was a supreme act of compassion and sensitivity, both for Mary’s reputation, but also for the still-to-be-born baby.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as

your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall name Him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” (Mt.1:20-23)

2.) **Joseph was a dreamer.** “a messenger of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said . . .” We are told that the angel of the Lord appeared to him, set his mind at ease enough so that Joseph would marry Mary. Later on we are told that again Joseph had an angel appear to him in a dream and guided him to take his family to Egypt (Mt. 2:13 – 15) to avoid the massacre of baby boys by King Herod.

We are all guided by our dreams, probably more than we are aware. Researchers tell us that our dreams help us to resolve the inner conflicts and emotional troubles we have. And, of course, we have all used the expression, “I’ll sleep on it,” when referring to a major decision with which we are faced.

Joseph had much inner turmoil to face in his life; including the discovery that **the virgin** to which he was betrothed was pregnant, that he was being forced to travel to Bethlehem with his about-to-deliver wife to be registered for the census, and the King ruling the land had just ordered the killing of all boys under the age two – and as we all know, he and Mary had a baby boy. And yet Joseph had the presence of mind to be calm, not to act quickly, but to piece it all together and to do what it takes to keep his family – and his loved ones – together.

Our dreams also have another connotation – they are what can guide us forward. Our dreams are our vision of what we can become. Too often when we are faced with conflict or tension we opt for what we know, what is conventional, the way we have always done it; instead of following the dreams and vision of what we could be, or in the case of the church, what we are called to be. Joseph followed the vision of God that came to him in his dreams – about what His Son would be. We would be wise to follow the vision God calls all followers to: to be faithful disciples inviting all to join in knowing God’s love.

3.) Thus far we have established Joseph as a dreamer of hope, a “just” man, and one who has a vision. But so are a lot of people – whether or not they have any religious affiliation. But there is one thing that sets Joseph apart from the common person. **He was obedient to God’s message** as it came to him from an angel of the Lord in a dream.

When Joseph awoke from his sleep, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she bore him a Son, and he named Him Jesus.” (Mt. 1: 24 – 25)

“He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him . . .” Joseph did not do the conventional – probably hundreds or thousands of baby boys were born in Israel in the two years that were affected by Herod’s decree to kill all newborn sons – as far as we know, only one of them was taken to Egypt to escape the carnage. Joseph was obedient to the

call of God. Joseph married Mary, named the baby Emmanuel according to a vision, took the family to Egypt, and brought them back to Israel after Herod had died, and then settled down in Nazareth – all these things as a result of following the visions of the angel which appeared to him in many dreams.

Obedience, . . . in this sense is not submission, but rather it is faith in action. It is, as the author of Hebrews suggests, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . By faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.” Obedience to God is putting faith into action.

The form and the circumstance may differ for each one of us, but the Christ Child comes to us with an opportunity to be people of faith. We can put our faith in action – to leave the security of being people of convention, people locked into doing things and understanding things simply because every one else does them and understands them that way, or because “we have always done it that way.”

In the story of Joseph and Mary and the birth of the Christ Child, Joseph was given the choice of faithful obedience. He had many other alternatives before him. On the one hand, he could have chosen the conventional route. He could have been selfish; he could have abandoned Mary and the about to be born baby. He could have ignored the call to go to Egypt and let his child be one of the thousands slaughtered under Herod’s hand; *or*, on the other hand, he could exercise his hope, his sense of justice, his vision, and most of all, his faithful obedience. Given an understanding of the conditions and social customs of that time, I suspect that the selfish, conventional choice would have been much easier to make. But Joseph, in making room for the Christ Child, chose to be faithful – revealing qualities of justice, vision, and obedience to his faith.

And that is the choice we all must make. Do we continue in the ways of the world? Do we do only what we have known? Or do we choose to be faithful, to be dreamers, to be just, and to be obedient to our faith by making room in our lives for the Christ Child?

May we go and be like Joseph.