

Advent Sermon Series 2009

The "Lesser" Christmas Characters 1: Gentle Joseph, Joseph Mine

Matthew 1:18-25

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1st Sunday of Advent

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Another advent season is upon us, the beginning of a new Christian year. We're inundated with images and sounds, tastes and smells that signal Christmastime is here. That's the power of icons, their ability to invoke thoughts and feelings in us. But sometimes the evocative power of those icons does the thinking for us. It's like a holiday form of shorthand, but in relying on it so heavily, we stop reading the story for ourselves. So this advent, as we prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ child, I want to look at the story from the perspective of Christmas characters who don't have many carols written about them. The advent of Christ presents all of us with certain choices: How will we respond to this birth? What will it mean to us? What will we do? As we tell the story of some of the lesser Christmas characters, we consider what choices were presented to them, what they decided, what they made of the ultimate Christmas gift. And I want to look first at Joseph.

It might seem harsh for me to label Joseph a secondary Christmas character. Yet to be honest, I have seen nativity sets with no recognizable Joseph. Or sometimes he's there, like in the set I have at home, but I can't tell him apart from the shepherd. Mary and the wise men are easy to identify, but every year I'm faced with the dilemma of the two other figures. Should the kneeling one be Joseph, kneeling in front of the Christ child along with Mary? Or should he be the standing figure, standing protectively over Mary and baby Jesus? The point is that his iconic power is weak. Really, the only way to identify him is by his halo – if he even has one. Poor Joseph!

Part of the problem is that we know so very little about Joseph. What story he does have is told in Matthew's gospel. In Luke's gospel he's basically an attachment of Mary's, and the other two gospels don't mention him at all. It's interesting, though, that in Matthew's gospel, Joseph is the major character and Mary is secondary. She's only mentioned as being betrothed to Joseph, but then found to be with child, and that presents Joseph with his first choice. Mary is presenting him with this absurd scenario, that she's pregnant not because she's been with someone else, but because it's God's will. Honestly, no matter how pious you are, are you really going to believe that explanation? We can't really blame Joseph for being skeptical. Matthew notes that Joseph planned to divorce her quietly in order to spare them both a public spectacle. But it raises an interesting question for us to pose to ourselves. Are God's plans ever embarrassing to us? Do we fear that they might even expose us to public ridicule and censure? Can it ever be that God's plans would strike us as scandalous, even sinful? Sometimes we're too eager to accept society's conventional view of what is pious and righteous. God might be calling us to do something new and daring, but if we choose society's standards over God's, then we might miss out on what God has planned.

Indeed, Joseph is poised to miss the boat himself, but then an angel visits him in a dream. An angel is a messenger from God. We could interpret this in a variety of ways: that a heavenly being did indeed appear to him, or perhaps as he contemplated his options, he was inspired. I know for myself, sometimes when I'm faced with a difficult decision I sleep on it, and in the morning my choice is much clearer. At any rate, while Joseph seemed to have made up his mind, it turns out he was still open to other possibilities.

The first thing the angel does is address Joseph's fears. But it's interesting to note that the angel does NOT say, "Don't be afraid, Joseph, no one's going to laugh at you." That is, the angel doesn't address those conventional fears of what everyone else is going to think. Rather, the angel addresses the issue of trust between Mary and Joseph. "She's telling the truth," the angel says. "You can indeed trust her." It's not Joseph's relationship with society that needs to be repaired, but rather his relationship with Mary. The Holy Spirit is at work in Mary, so Joseph should not be afraid of her or ashamed of her. Indeed, if we think of this message coming not so much from an angelic being but from Joseph's own conscience, then it's more a matter of Joseph realizing that he truly does know Mary, that she wouldn't lie to him no matter how preposterous her story sounds. It shows Mary and Joseph as equal partners who must trust and rely on each other in order to see this thing through.

Then the angel lays out the mission. It has three parts, a role for each of them to play: Mary will give birth to a son, the child will save people from their sins, and Joseph's role is to give him the name Jesus. It may seem like a small role to us, but it has many levels of significance. Names are powerful. God's name is so powerful that it can never be spoken aloud. People in the Bible are often given names that say something significant about their birth, or their name may be changed as a result of their encounter with God.

But beyond that, in ancient days it was the father who gave children their names. For example, when Jesus' cousin John the Baptist was born, his mother Elizabeth said his name would be John. But people wouldn't take her word for it. They went to her husband Zechariah and asked him. If you recall, he had been struck mute for his skepticism of Elizabeth, but when he wrote out, "His name is John," then he was able to talk again.

There's an additional significance here, though, because people would always question whether Joseph was truly Jesus' father. For Joseph to name Jesus meant he was claiming Jesus as his son. And he gave Jesus more than just a name. He also gave him a lineage. As you may know, both Matthew and Luke give a genealogy for Jesus, but that line always traces through Joseph. I've never heard a convincing argument for why that is. What does it matter if Joseph's lineage goes back to King David, since he's not actually Jesus' father? Wouldn't Mary's lineage be more important? But last year I heard a sermon about the lineage, and suddenly it was as if I was hearing it for the first time: it's the lineage of an adopted child. Families formed by adoption know how thorny the issue of a family tree can get. Family trees seem so innocent, yet how do you depict them for a person who was adopted? The gospels present at least one answer: that this rich heritage belongs to Jesus not by blood but by adoption. Joseph didn't just give Jesus a name, he gave him a heritage, a legacy, and this was an essential role. Jesus needed a mother to give him birth and a father to give him a name so that he could save the people from their sins.

Questions this story raises for us, then, include: How do we listen for holy messengers? Do we hear them in a voice, in contemplation, while we sleep, in prayer? How do we know what voice to listen to and trust? Another good question to ask is how is our trust in God related to our trust in the people around us. Do we know God best through a distant society that is poised to pass judgment on our decisions? Or do we know God best through the people we know intimately, who may sometimes come up with some crazy ideas, but we also know that their heart is in the right place and we should listen to them?

And what role might God be asking us to play in God's mission of salvation? God cannot do this without us. God could not take on flesh without a human mother. Mary gave Jesus of her very body, her physicality. But Joseph gave Jesus a name, a lineage, a place in society. Without that, Jesus might have been an outcast. Now certainly his mission was to those who were cast out of society, but if Jesus had started there himself, then he might never have been heard at all. And

he did not use his royal lineage from Joseph in order to parade around and lord himself over everyone. It's one thing to use your name and lineage as a shortcut to gain people's respect, but that's not what Jesus did. Rather, he used his name and lineage as credentials, to give him enough credibility so that people would listen to him.

But it's about more than just a pedigree. I may not know the names of all my ancestors, but more important are the values that have been passed down from generation to generation, even the stories we tell and the songs we sing. For example, in my family, 90% of my relatives are teachers. Is that a coincidence, or does it say something about how my family has valued education, even across generations? We inherit so many of our values from relatives who have passed them on from parent to child: values of fairness, of justice, of love and compassion. Values of honesty and hard work. Joseph didn't just give Jesus a name and a legacy, he also taught Jesus, as his father had taught him. Joseph taught Jesus his carpenter's trade. He also would have been the one to take Jesus to synagogue to hear the stories of his faith. He would have played a significant role in Jesus' education, he would have shaped the way Jesus saw his faith, and the world, and his role in the world.

So when the Christ child appears to us, when we are invited to participate in God's mission, what part of ourselves will we pass on to that mission? God becomes incarnate in flesh but also in culture and society. In other words, God always needs to be translated into the language, the idiom, of the times. How do we embody God in our times? How do we express God's mission in our music, our stories, in the food we eat and the places where we gather?