

Joseph

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Isaiah 9: 6-7; Matthew 1:18-25

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1st Sunday of Advent

In the gospel reading today we are told of the details around the birth of Christ. It is this great news that we've continued to celebrate throughout the centuries. Today is the day that we begin the celebration of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. It is a time of celebration but more of reflection and consideration, a time of prayer and quiet introspection. It is the first Sunday of Advent a time to ponder the coming of the Christ Child and the expectation of receiving the King of Kings into the world. It is a time to gather close with family and friends and make the Christmas season special because it really is when we celebrate, not only with one another but also with – Charlie Brown, the Little Drummer Boy and George Bailey. If you have children, and maybe if you do not, you probably have realized that this season is about the real American God, the one that begins the season on Black Friday, extends through the December DOR (day of returns) and all the way through the January White sales. This is not the topic for today – I am going to speak briefly about something we do not talk much about, someone that most know little about and perhaps someone we should know better. The legal Patriarch of Jesus Christ, Joseph.

As many of you may know I am a student in the “Certificate in Sexuality and Religion” program at Pacific School of Religion. My class this semester is “Queer Religious Leaders;” its focus is the theology of a broad range of leaders and readings. We have already read articles from 41 different religious authors all of who have some tie to Queer Theology or Theology of Sexuality. It may seem that the word (->whispering<- S-E-X) does not belong in a Sunday Worship Service and especially one during the Christmas season. However, the common theme among these theologies and writings from Troy Perry and Virginia Mollenkott to Yvette Flunder is hospitality, extravagant welcome, the welcoming of the Christ Child and everyone – indeed – anyone, else. If you are Joseph in the text we read you begin with an idea that you have been rejected by the one to whom you are betrothed and you end up the legal father of the Messiah. I hope you will reflect on this a moment, from an aging old man who has been cheated on to the legal father of the Messiah (talk about a leap of faith). Were the shirts at the National Equality March correct, “Jesus had 2 dads”? Just how much control did Joseph have, and who was this man; could he have set aside his responsibility.

Certainly his first thought had been to “set her aside,” in other words to quietly break the betrothal. She was pregnant and he was not the father – sounds like it could be any neighborhood in America today. For the sake of all of us an angel came while Joseph was sleeping and told him that Mary was carrying a child from the Holy Spirit. How would you react to this news? Had an Angel delivered such news to you, would you turn away? Let's let this remind us to reflect and discern God's assistance before we ever turn away from anyone for any reason.

Poor Joseph is faced with “stepping out of the closet” with a woman much younger who is pregnant or turning away and allowing her to be stoned. It is a difficult decision, but perhaps for Joseph, a devout man, not so difficult: an angel really was above suspicion and anger. Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded and married Mary. Some believe that Joseph was close to twice Mary's age and that he may have even been a widower. He is only a minor character of the New Testament based on the amount of “press” that he gets. But what might have been his perspective and what can we learn from him?

Let's look at this first chapter of Matthew, the first chapter of the new Covenant; we see that it begins with the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. In the first 16 verses only four women are mentioned: Rahab, Ruth, Tamar, and Bathsheba (mentioned as the wife of Uriah). These four are a wonderful loving and sweet innocent bunch – ok not so much. Rahab was a Canaanite *and* a prostitute, Ruth a Moabite, Tamar and Bathsheba adulteresses in some form. The point is that Jesus comes from a heritage of spiritual sexuality and acceptance, "...neither Jew nor Greek..." and Joseph was willing to accept Mary and do what needed to be done. This role probably required an older and more stable man.

Joseph is mentioned the last time when Jesus is 12. The family has gone to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast and Jesus stays behind to listen in the Temple and to ask questions. When they go back and find him, he tells them he was in his Father's House. This reference in Luke is the last time that we hear of Joseph as he must have died before or very soon after the beginning of the ministry of Christ.

What is it then that we can garner from such a "minor" character as Joseph? If we read carefully in the first chapter of Matthew we can find the love and hospitality of humankind. We can find the acceptance of Jew and Gentile; we find the acceptance of spiritual sexuality and with enough discernment and prayer perhaps the beginning of liberation theology. Whatever it is you discern won't you join with me in reflecting on the season, on inviting God into your decisions before turning away, and most of all ask for the strength to welcome the Christ Child regardless of your burden.

AMEN