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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
December 22, 2013
Matthew 1:18-25
Advent 4

Holy God, as your angel spoke to Joseph, speak to us now; help us to be people who reach out in your spirit of love to others; help us to break through the customs and traditions that exclude others; and help us to see other people as you do: as beloved children of God. Amen.

“What We Can Learn From Joseph”

While doing some research for today’s sermon, I read a funny little story about a 4 year old girl who was drawing a picture of the nativity. She was intense and stayed with it a long time. When she completed the picture she proudly showed it to her mother and carefully explained each figure and character: the shepherds and sheep, the three wise men and their loaded camels, the stable with cows and even a cat and a dog and, of course, in the center of it, Mary and the baby Jesus. But her mother noticed something was missing. “Where’s Joseph?” she asked, assuming the girl would remember and sketch him in. Instead, according to the mother, the girl gave her a look of exasperation and defiantly asked, “Who needs Joseph, anyway?”

Poor Joseph. If he isn’t forgotten he’s relegated to the back of the nativity with nothing to do. Have you ever noticed that Joseph is a non-speaking part in most Christmas pageants? And the great works of art picturing the nativity . . . they rarely include Joseph, and if they do he’s often in an obscure place or pushed to the sidelines. Heck, the shepherds and wise men get more press than Joseph, and shepherds were on the bottom rung of the social ladder and the wise men showed up late. The carols we sing give Mary all the credit. And who can forget the narrator in John Irving’s novel [A Prayer for Owen Meany](#), who recalled his own starring role as Joseph in the church Christmas pageant by quipping: “I, Joseph, had nothing to do, nothing to say, nothing to learn.”

But the way Matthew tells the story, Joseph does have something to learn. And it is Joseph who is the central figure. Mary is silent in Matthew’s birth story. The angel visits Joseph, not Mary. And there are no shepherds or cranky inn keepers or mangers out back. No, there’s only Joseph, and his dream.

For Matthew it all begins with Joseph—and his dilemma. You see, his fiancée announces that she is pregnant, and Joseph knows he’s not the father. He fears she’s been unfaithful—after all, what else could be the reason for her pregnancy?

Mary was betrothed to Joseph, which meant that their fathers had arranged the marriage; and back then a “marriage” began with an engagement, but not the sort of engagement we have today. Mary and Joseph’s engagement was a legal contract that was hard to get out of; you couldn’t just call off the wedding.

So Joseph finds himself in a very difficult and very embarrassing position. The preacher Will Willimon once said that if Mary is “blessed among women”; Joseph is definitely “embarrassed among men.”

Now we might think this whole pregnancy thing puts Joseph between a rock and hard place. I mean, this is some dilemma in which to find one’s self. Imagine the scandal, the gossip around town, and the rumors that followed.

Is it any wonder Luke’s version of the birth story is our preferred version?

But the rules were very simple and clear cut for Joseph’s situation; Mary was to be stoned to death. That was the punishment for adultery.

Plus, Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, which meant he was compelled to follow the law. Remember, Joseph is from the lineage of David, so not only is he a fine upstanding Jew, he’s a Jew from a very well-known and distinguished family. A man like Joseph would never disobey the law.

And yet . . . before Jesus is born, Joseph has second thoughts about the law. He resolves not to turn Mary over to the authorities but to send her away instead. Now, we might interpret this as hard-hearted but trust me, this was a **bold move** to make, because when Joseph dismissed Mary, he dismissed (for all intents and purposes) his religion’s law – and that was unheard of for a distinguished Jew like Joseph.

But then comes the dream in which Joseph learns that the child to be born is from God. So upon hearing the angel explain the who, what, how and why of Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph makes a **second** bold decision: he’ll go through with the marriage. He will be Mary’s husband and the child’s father. When the baby arrives, it’s Joseph who names him Jesus. And then he takes his place in the back row, doing what new fathers have always done best—watching and wondering what the heck just happened.

We can learn a lot from Joseph, the silent dreamer relegated to the sidelines. Because, this story isn’t just about the birth of Jesus, this story is about learning a whole new set of rules and learning to see the world with a whole new set of eyes.

For you see, Joseph, the righteous one, isn’t righteous because he followed the letter of the law. Joseph isn’t righteous because he does what his scriptures tell him to do; Joseph is righteous because he **doesn’t** do what the scriptures tell him to do; he doesn’t follow the Law and have Mary stoned. Instead, he does the right thing—despite what his religion tells him to do . . . and stays with her. Joseph, often overlooked, often relegated to the sidelines, is the first person to discover that the coming of the Christ child redefines righteousness. Joseph knows it’s time to look at the world with a new set of eyes, because it’s going to be governed by a whole new set of rules.

We can learn a lot from Joseph about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ *even before Christ is born*, because at the very beginning of this story, Matthew makes a statement about what it means to be righteous, and it isn't the statement people were expecting. Joseph the dreamer, trusts relationships more than rules. Joseph the righteous one, based his decision on love, not the law. Joseph the new father, looked at his newborn son, and somehow understood that under his reign, in his kingdom, the world would be governed by a different set of laws, and these laws would be based on love.

And so, at the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew makes a very important, and very counter-cultural statement, and Joseph responds accordingly.

But his response shouldn't surprise us, given his ancestry. Matthew lists 4 notable women in Jesus' genealogy. There is Tamar, a Canaanite widow who dressed as a prostitute, sold herself to her father-in-law, and consequently bore his child. There's Rahab, a real prostitute, who hid two of Joshua's spies which led to the Israelites sparing her and her family in the battle of Jericho. There's the wife of Uriah, also known as Bathsheba. David had Uriah killed when he wanted Bathsheba all for himself. And then there's Ruth the Moabite; the Moabites were enemies of the Israelites.

These women are Joseph's, and therefore Jesus' ancestors!

And so, at the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew makes a statement about breaking down barriers that divide and exclude, and redefines who is in and who is out, and just what makes someone righteous. And it is not what people expected.

And in many ways, it is still not what people expect. The dilemma Joseph faced is alive and well today. Do we follow the Bible word for word, or do we act in a way that respects both the Bible and the Christian orientation to love our neighbors as ourselves, even when it contradicts what the Bible seems to say?

That's not an easy question to answer, and the Church with a capital C has struggled with it since the day Jesus was born. What wall is God calling us to tear down, and what bridge does God call us to build?

I believe Matthew is trying to tell us in this story about Joseph, that the Messiah we await is not one who will apply laws rigidly and legalistically, but is one who will follow the heart of the law, and hopes that we will do the same.

We've been talking about trying to find balance this season; balance between the commercial Christmas and the holy in the holiday. If we are faithful, though, this is a balance we'll try to find at other times of the year, too, as we carefully balance the culture with Christianity, as we carefully listen for the word of God as it comes to us today, while interpreting that word with fresh insights in a spirit of Christian love so that everyone knows they are always welcome to walk in the light of the Lord.

In the meantime, though, the holy I look for in the holiday is that we who call ourselves by the name "Christian" would always remember that God loves in a way bigger than we can imagine.

The holy I look for is a Christian faith strong enough to admit that neither you nor I nor any church holds a franchise on God. No particular tradition, no single theology, no denomination, can stuff the Divine into their little box.

This Christmas, I dare to hope for a Christianity that is expansive and generous and big-hearted. I dare to hope for this, in fact I actually expect it, simply because, as we see in the Christmas story, miracles really do happen.

Amen.