

Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 1:18-25

December 24, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

What child is this? We have looked at this question from the perspective of the shepherds, the Wise Men, and Mary. This week we are taking a look at Joseph.

Our theme for this Advent has been, "What Child Is This?" That is also the title of a very popular Christmas song. I mentioned in this month's newsletter that this song actually began as a poem, "The Manger Throne", written in 1865. A few years later some of the words of that poem were paired with "Greensleeves", a traditional English folk song. This combination of poem and folk song was then published as the hymn on page 219 in our hymnal.

Take a look at it sometime. You can do it now if you are bored or curious...or do it later. The version in our hymnal consists of three verses. The first verse mentions the child and Mary and the angels and the shepherds. The second verse mentions the animals...the ox and donkey. The third verse does not mention the Wise Men specifically, but the gifts of incense and gold and myrrh are mentioned. So we can infer mention of the Magi from that. So the whole cast of characters is there. We are even there because the song refers to sinners. One person gets no mention...not even a hint. Joseph.

But...that's just the way it is and has been. Joseph does seem to be, at times, the forgotten one. Joseph helped raise this child. Joseph invested himself in the life of this child. Joseph was a carpenter. I'm thinking Joseph and Jesus spent time together in the workshop. But Joseph gets very little mention even in the Gospels. Mark

makes zero mention of him. Joseph does get some ink in Matthew, Luke, and John; but those three did not have to re-dip their pens while writing about him. Matthew, Luke, and John give Joseph no speaking part. Joseph's actions are recorded, but we do not know of one word he uttered.

But we do know three important things about him: he was present; he cared; he was obedient. Maybe that is all we need to know.

So we read the story of Joseph. It is recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew tells us, "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about..." Then we are told about Mary. She was pledged to be married to Joseph. They were engaged, but not yet married. Remember, though, that an engagement was legally binding. Ending an engagement at that time was more than giving or taking back a ring. It took a divorce to end an engagement. It was during the engagement period when Mary became pregnant.

Joseph found out about this deal. How did he find out? We don't know for sure. But I am going to make a guess. I think Mary must have told him. I could be way off base here. But, you know, Mary was visited by Gabriel before she became pregnant. Joseph was not given the benefit of a pre-pregnancy angelic appearance. Someone told him. I'm going with Mary.

That must have been quite the conversation. First, there was the hurt and disappointment Joseph would have felt. But what did he then think when Mary shared with him the news that she had not been unfaithful? The child conceived in her was the Son of God. We have usually been quick to assume that Joseph would not have believed Mary. But did you ever wonder if perhaps Joseph did believe Mary...or at least wondered if maybe what she was telling him

might be true...and he thought himself unworthy to be involved in such a miraculous event? Anyway...I could, once again, be way off base. But I offer that as a point to ponder. I mean we talk about these things every year at this time...so I'm just offering some new stuff to think about.

Speaking of a different thing to think about. I'm just tossing this in. There is that great story in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel. You know...the one about the woman caught in adultery. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought this woman to Jesus. The woman had been caught in the very act of adultery. One wonders why the man was not also brought before Jesus, but that discussion is for a different time. The law said this woman could be stoned to death. Now that was extreme. The law also provided for divorce. You can read about that in the fifth chapter of Numbers. But those legal eagles who brought that woman before Jesus were testing Jesus' adherence to the law...and his compassion. We know how the story ends.

Now I am not suggesting that Jesus learned compassion from his stepfather, Joseph. But this does show us just how compassionate a man Joseph was. See, Joseph could have gone to the extreme. He could have publicly humiliated Mary. He could have had the religious authorities throw the book at her. This would have spared him being humiliated by his buddies.

So we learn something very important about Joseph. He was righteous, and he was also compassionate. He did not want to publicly humiliate Mary. Joseph was a righteous and compassionate and godly man. No wonder God chose him to be the stepdad to his Son. Then an angel came to him in a dream and assured him everything would be just fine.

You know, for many years Joseph was, indeed, seen as the father of Jesus. At the end of the second chapter of Luke there is that story of a trip Joseph and Mary took to Jerusalem. Jesus was a twelve-year-old boy at the time. While on the way home, Mary and Joseph noticed Jesus was not with them. They went back to Jerusalem and found him in the temple courts conversing with teachers. Mary said to him, "Son, why have

you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Joseph was the "your father" to which Mary referred. There are a few instances in the gospels where Jesus is referred to as the son of Joseph.

But we know that Joseph was more like a stepdad to Jesus. Joseph knew what was going on. So what child is this? What did Joseph see? I think he saw, for a time, a child he was raising as one of his...a child he loved. I'm also thinking Joseph saw a quality that he, Joseph, also had. Humility. Only Joseph would not know that he, Joseph, was humble, because...you know...once you think you are humble, you are not. Jesus was the only one who could claim to be humble and still remain humble. Go figure.

Think of modern day royals. Of course, the monarchy with which we are most familiar is England. If you are descended from the queen there, you cannot even get engaged without most of the world knowing about it. Then there is all the foo-fa-rah that goes with that...all the rules and decorum and stuff. And when a child is born...someone who is somewhere in line for the throne...well the whole world goes ga-ga.

God promised a Messiah...a king who would draw all nations to him...a King of all kings. Why not just send an already grown up king? I mean, skip all that birth and growing up part. Just get to it. God could have done that.

No. Jesus was equal with God...but humbled himself...and became just like us. All the fullness of God looked just like us for a time. God took on skin. There was no big castle involved. We are talking a barn and a feeding trough here. Joseph, a most humble man, who centuries later barely gets a mention in the story, gazed on humility that exceeds anything we could ever imagine.

But here's the deal. Jesus became like us. And we can become like him. Joseph, knowing Jesus was God's Son, raised him in his house as one of his own. Because of Jesus, we are children of God. Hear that...we are God's children...because of Jesus. And because of Jesus and all of who Jesus is and all of what

Jesus accomplished and all of Jesus' humility and obedience, God receives us as his very own children.

That's who this child is. This season, as we do all our celebrating, let's celebrate this wonderful truth: each of us is a child of God. We call God, "Abba, Father!" We are joint heirs with Jesus. All because this child was born.

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."