

***“Joseph’s Story”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
**December 2, 2018**

**Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16**

<sup>14</sup>The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

**New Testament Reading: Matthew 1:18-25**

<sup>18</sup>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 from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.



**Sermon: *“Joseph’s Story”***

Georgetown Presbyterian Church, the church of my childhood, used to put on a live nativity pageant every year during Advent. A local farmer would lend us some sheep for the shepherds to tend, a goat or two for the stable, and a donkey for Mary to ride into Bethlehem on. There were spotlights and a sound system and a cast of dozens and we did two shows a night during the week or so before Christmas. It was a fairly elaborate production.

As a high school senior, I was asked to play the role of Joseph. At first, I was impressed to have been cast in such a prominent role. But after a few rehearsals, it dawned on me that I had not been invited to play Joseph because I was a gifted actor or because I had the chiseled good looks of a leading man. No, I was given the role because at 6’1”, and 200 lbs, I was big enough to hold the reigns of the donkey, lead it around the set, and perhaps keep it from wandering off during the show.

Every night during the pageant, I led the animal in with the sparkling Mary riding side-saddle and when we reached the manger, I would take Mary’s hand, help her dismount, and then as she knelt down with the baby, basking in the glory of a literal spotlight, I would spend the remainder of the play standing off to the side, in the darkness, watching middle-school boys dressed as shepherds and middle-aged wise men dressed in old bathrobes paying their respects to the mother of Christ. My biggest challenge each night was to hold the donkey and try not to let it step on my foot.

I have heard it said that in the theater, there are no small parts, only small actors. But even though we generally speak of “Mary and Joseph” as the parents of Jesus, Joseph’s part in the overall story, as we usually tell it, is a small one. But today we’ll see that his small role was actually pretty important.

Now usually at this time of year we talk more about Mary, anyway. It is her story, of a frightened young girl who shows remarkable courage in accepting her role as the mother of Christ, with which we are most familiar. And with good reason; Mary actually had the hard work of bearing a child thrust upon her. She receives the news of her pregnancy from an angel when she is not yet married. She must not only face the embarrassment and scandal of being pregnant before marriage, but she must also endure the long months of carrying a child. I don’t know if divine pregnancies are any easier than regular ones, but I’m going to assume that they’re not. Mary would still have had all of the swelling, the

discomfort, the back pain, the kicking at odd hours, the 8-pound baby riding on your bladder, not to mention the actual pain of childbirth in an age long before epidurals.

And even after the birth narrative, Mary continues to be present throughout the story of Jesus' life, even making an appearance at the foot of the cross.

Joseph, on the other hand, after the birth story, is completely forgotten. Even in the nativity story he is but a bit player. Except for a few brief references in Matthew and Luke, Joseph spends most of the gospel story on the sidelines. Mark doesn't even bother to mention him at all and John only mentions him in referring to Jesus as "son of Joseph."

But he is included here. There are no small parts, remember... and while Joseph's time on stage is limited, his part is pretty important, theologically. You see Joseph cements Jesus' identity as a descendant of David and of Abraham, and therefore, as fulfillment of God's covenant promises and as the rightful heir to the throne of Israel.

Now, we began reading today with Matthew, chapter 1, verse 18. Part of the reason we didn't start with verse 1 is that those first 17 verses are incredibly boring. Those verses are a list of the descendants of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac; Isaac was the father of Jacob; Jacob was the father of Judah, Judah was the father Perez and Zerah and blah, buh-blah buh-blah. No one really wants to read all those boring, pointless, endless lists of ancestors, right?

But we have to remember that the authors of scripture had a certain economy of language. Scrolls and parchment and ink were expensive and hard to come by. And authors didn't get paid by the word, so they didn't go around writing things and including them in their manuscripts unless they were important. That Matthew includes this list must mean that there is something here we should be paying attention to.

If you carefully go through this list of ancestors you will see that it begins with Abraham, goes through David and ends with Joseph. This tedious, apparently inconsequential list of names actually establishes Joseph as a descendant of David and Abraham. That means he is part of the royal lineage of David and heir to the throne of Israel. And he is also a descendant of Abraham to whom God made a promise to give a son and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky; a promise to make of Abraham "a great nation and"... and this is where it really finds its fulfillment in Jesus... "a blessing unto *all* nations."

That long, boring, seemingly pointless genealogy actually tells us that Joseph is key to the identity of Jesus. Any son of Joseph will also be an heir to the throne of David and the promise to Abraham.

But as this story begins in verse 18, Joseph is in a difficult spot. Because Joseph has just found out that the woman to whom he has been betrothed is pregnant and he can be absolutely sure for reasons we shouldn't need to explain here, that he is not the father. This is a problem.

Bible scholar Douglas Hare tells us that "Betrothal was equivalent to marriage. The marriage was completed when the groom took his betrothed to his own home. In the interval, she remained in her father's home, and sexual intercourse was not permitted. Infidelity counted as adultery."<sup>1</sup>

So basically, "betrothed" means you've been promised to someone and even though you are not yet married, according to the law you are *still* treated as though you are married. Mary's pregnancy would have been seen then as irrefutable evidence of her engaging in illicit sexual relations. And for a woman betrothed to one man to have relations with another, would be the same as adultery.

The Old Testament books of Leviticus<sup>2</sup> and Deuteronomy<sup>3</sup> both state that the penalty for adultery is death. That Mary and Joseph were not yet technically married, would not have mattered.

Though Joseph was a righteous man, he appears to have been a soft-hearted man as well. We don't know much about him, but even though the community is bound by law to put her to death, he keeps the news of her pregnancy to himself and chooses instead to "divorce her quietly." He seems to not only want to preserve her life but her dignity as well; saving her the embarrassment that could result from a public ending to the relationship. So, Joseph chose to just quietly end the relationship, responding with mercy and concern for Mary rather than a strict reading of the law which was pretty black and white on the matter.

But God is doing a new and amazing thing in the life of this as yet unborn child, and that new thing lays claim to Joseph, too. In a dream, Joseph is visited by an angel of the Lord who tells him that this child is of the Holy Spirit and that Joseph should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife.

So, Joseph is faced with a difficult decision: should he, a righteous man, strictly follow the law with which he is so familiar and have her put to death, should he dismiss her quietly, or should he step out in faith to take this woman as his wife and claim this child as his own, as the angel has instructed?

Noted Presbyterian preacher Tom Long has written that "what appears to be a moral outrage is, in fact, a holy disruption. The child in Mary's womb is not a violation of God's will, but an expression of it."<sup>4</sup>

And so, we are told that Joseph does follow through with his commitment to take Mary as his wife and afterwards, almost as a means to ensure that there is no doubt about the origin of this child, their marriage is not consummated until after the birth.

Now to the astute observer, there is a very obvious problem. If Joseph is not the biological father of the child, how can the child be his heir and by extension, heir to the promises of Abraham and the throne of David? Well, finally we have come to Joseph's big moment. Here we find his worth... beyond just holding the donkey.

The Angel of the Lord has instructed Joseph to name the child Jesus and while we tend to focus on the *name*, what matters most is the *naming*. You see, there is power in the naming. It was customary for the mother to name her child. By Joseph naming the baby, people of that time and place would have understood that he was laying claim to the child as his own; effectively adopting him into Joseph's line, bridging the gap, legally incorporating him into David's lineage and the genealogy with which Matthew began his gospel story.<sup>5</sup>

Now the primary purpose of Joseph's story is complete. Joseph is established as the legal father of a child born of the Holy Spirit who is thus, the rightful heir to the throne of David and is the fulfillment of the covenant promises God made to Abraham so long ago.

And while he is not even remotely the star of this show, Joseph plays a very important role in it's even getting off the ground. For it is his step of faith which allows for the mother and child to live and to be incorporated into the long story of God's redemptive work in Israel. In the life of this child born in a marginal community to a woman of marginal importance, God is doing a new and amazing thing. By his willingness to go against convention, Joseph serves as a conduit for God's will, letting that new and amazing thing flow through him into the world.

Joseph has a small part, but a big role.

If we go back and examine the decision Joseph had to make, we find that he was torn between three equally viable options. He was bound by law to dismiss a woman who was betrothed to him but by the evidence at hand appeared to have been unfaithful. He was bound by his own conscience to protect her from harm. And he is approached by an angel in a dream to follow through with the marriage. All of these options were legitimate, but Joseph has to choose.

Now, would Jesus still have come into the world to save us from sin and death without Joseph's help? Sure. God is sovereign. God will do what God will do. But Joseph answered a call to participate in God's Kingdom work.

Discipleship often means making small decisions to follow God. And we make those choices from among what appear to be several good options. And discipleship usually means making a decision to follow even when we cannot see where the path leads and with no real indication of where it will end.

Joseph didn't make a big, history-making decision. He didn't choose to become the father of the son of God; the Messiah; the savior of all the world. Joseph chose to follow through with an engagement.

You see, there are lots of small parts, but no insignificant ones because every part is important and while we may not be able to see the totality of the larger whole, God can use each of us as instruments of grace to build God's Kingdom.

There is an old story that preachers love to tell of a man who came upon a construction site where three people were working. He asked the first, "What are you doing?" and the worker replied: "I am laying bricks." He asked the second, "What are you doing?" and the worker replied: "I am laying bricks." As he approached the third, he heard him humming a tune as he worked, and asked, "What are you doing?" The man stood, looked up at the sky, smiled and said, "I am building a cathedral!"<sup>6</sup>

You see, rarely will we ever be asked to play a starring role, like Mary. Rarely will you and I ever find ourselves in the spotlight of God's glory, when it is obvious that we are the linchpin in God's master plan. But every day God calls us, you and I, to small parts that are important to God's Kingdom. The Kingdom isn't built with grand gestures. The Kingdom is built from daily acts of love, kindness, and compassion.

Are you teaching children's Sunday School?

Are you making lunches for the Open Shelter?

Are you being welcoming and kind to the stranger?

Or are you building the Kingdom of God?

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R. A. "Matthew 1:18-25 Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Vol. 1, Year A. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 93. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 20:10, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 22:13-24, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Long, Thomas G. *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997. 13. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Hare, Douglas R. A. "Matthew 1:18-25 Exegetical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Vol. 1, Year A. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 95. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Storlie, Jean. "Bricks, Walls, Cathedrals: A Story-bite to Lead with Vision." *Storlietelling.com*. Storlietelling, 14 Aug. 2013. Web. 05 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.storlietelling.com/2013/08/14/bricks-walls-cathedrals-a-story-bite-to-lead-with-vision/>>.