

A GOOD WORD FOR JOSEPH  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 1:18-25

Today let's say a good word for Joseph, because there aren't many words said about him—good or bad—in the scriptures. Joseph is always there. He's mentioned in the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke. He stands there in the manger scenes on our mantelpieces. But he is an indistinct character, appearing only in the Christmas story, and then disappearing from the gospels altogether.

If he were around today, I would imagine that Joseph would be one of those church members who is quiet and unassuming, but who always is available to do what is asked of him. He's not the nattiest dresser, wearing that out-of-date plaid coat with the striped tie. Any church would value a person with his carpentry skills, of course, so he's called to fix that broken chair in the Sunday school room, or take a look at the lamp that's not working anymore. "Joseph is a good man," we would say, "salt of the earth."

According to the scriptures he is betrothed to Mary. It may be, as tradition has it, that he is twice her age, but there's no word that this May-December romance caused any great discussion in the community.

What was devastating was when Joseph heard the news: Mary was expecting a child. How could she do such a thing? Had she just been stringing him along when she had promised to be his wife?

In the 1<sup>st</sup>-century world, it was the man's prerogative in such cases simply to call off the marriage. If he wanted to, the offended husband or fiancé could make a public spectacle of the woman, to humiliate her as a way to get back at her for humiliating him.

So here is the first surprise from old Joseph: He decided not to do any of that. He was a good man. It was not his way to shame another person. He resolved to do things in a way that kept Mary's humiliation to a minimum, and simply to "dismiss her quietly."

But then an angel came to Joseph in a dream. That's another thing you need to know about Joseph: he was a dreamer, the sort of person who remembered every detail of his dreams, the sort who would show up the next day and say: "Let me tell you what I dreamed last night." In the space of the few verses that Joseph appears in Matthew's gospel, we are told of four dreams where angels appeared to him to tell him what to do next.

So here, as he resolved to put his pregnant fiancée away quietly, an angel came to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child that is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

We can only wonder what Joseph's reaction was to that. "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Afraid? Betrayed was more like it. How could he make her his wife after what she had done? But that is exactly what the angel said to do.

And what was all this about being conceived by the Holy Spirit? Who ever heard of such a thing? Was it just a fancy cover-up, or was it really true?

And the name! Joseph had long dreamed of the day he would be the father of a child, a child that he would name after himself—Joseph. But the angel told him to call the child's name Jesus. It was a traditional name, sort of an updated form of the old name Joshua, which means "God saves." That, in fact, was why the angel commanded that name: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

What sort of birth is this, announced by an angel? What sort of pregnancy is this, conceived by the Holy Spirit? What sort of child is this, coming to save people from their sins?

And then comes one of the most remarkable sentences in the entire gospel story: "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him." All the doubts and questions and uncertainties, yet he did as the angel commanded him.

He could have done it the other way. We can imagine Joseph saying: “This is crazy. I’ve never heard of a conception by the Holy Spirit. I don’t want to give my child a different name. I don’t want Mary as my wife.” But instead, he trusted, and took Mary as his wife.

He trusted. He never says “yeah, but” or “what if.” In fact, Joseph never says a word. Not once in the entire gospel is there a recorded word of Joseph. Joseph shows his trust, not with grand words, but with his trusting actions.

Joseph is before us as a model of Christian trust. He trusts. He doesn’t try to out-manuever God, or out-fox the angel. He trusts. It is God’s will, and he will do it. What one writer said of the Virgin Mary and her acceptance of God’s will, could here be equally applied to Joseph, that he was the one who could do nothing but “merely receive, merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with [him].”<sup>1</sup>

We’ll read a little more about Joseph in next week’s scripture, but after that, he fades from the gospel record and disappears. One guess is that he died during the growing years of Jesus. Despite the fact that his name is mentioned every year at Christmas, he is definitely not one of the major figures in the gospel story.

We can only say that Joseph’s part of the story, while not big, was essential. The coming of God into our world could only have been carried out because Joseph heard and obeyed and trusted. No doubt, if Joseph hadn’t followed through, God would and could have found some other way. But it was this way that God chose, and it happened because when the angel came to Joseph, he believed and did what was asked of him.

In a way, then, Joseph models for us the sort of life that his son Jesus will teach later on. “Blessed are the meek, . . . the merciful, . . . the pure in heart, . . . the peacemakers.” The disciple of Christ is not one who calls a lot of attention to himself or herself. It is rather the lack of ostentation and showiness that Jesus calls for, and we see it first of all in Joseph.

It has been said that we should do great things for God. And we should. Sometimes it seems that in our day all anyone wants to do is great things for God—great headlines, great pronouncements, great churches, great denunciations against alternate points of view. Sometimes it seems that what we have is all these Christians jockeying for

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, p. 191.

position—politicians trying to outdo one another with assertions about how devout they are, preachers on TV with noisy diatribes and smooth answers.

Maybe we should concentrate, not on the great things, but on the small, not more but less.<sup>2</sup> But for most of us on most of our days we are not called to do great things, but to do our small things well. Like Joseph, most of us will not figure prominently in the story of faith. Ours, most of us, will be a small part.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it well: “Those who would learn to serve must first learn to think little of themselves.”<sup>3</sup> And here is the apostle Paul: “Let us not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.” (Romans 12:3) Joseph seems to have understood that lesson.

There are others in the Christmas story who will attract our attention more readily: Mary, certainly; the shepherds startled by the choir of angels; the wise men with their exotic gifts. But standing over there in the shadows is Joseph, calling no attention to himself, asking nothing except the singular privilege of demonstrating his trust in the startling, surprising, unexpected power of God. †

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<sup>2</sup> Dale Bruner, *Matthew, Volume 1: The Christbook* (Dallas: Word Publishing 1987), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 94.