

A Man Like Joseph

Advent 4, Year A - Matthew 1:18-25

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 22, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I heard from one of my friends this week that for her church's Christmas pageant this past week, one of the characters was a no-show. It seems that a worried mother phoned the parish office on the afternoon of their Christmas pageant. Her son, the young man who had been chosen to play the role of Joseph in the Christmas play, had come down with a terrible cold and had been sent to bed on doctor's orders. "It's too late now to get another Joseph," the frazzled director of the play said. "We'll just have to write him out of the script." And they did! The time for the pageant came and the Nativity tableau unfolded as usual, with one exception. No man at the manger. Joseph just... disappeared! And, what's *more*, my friend tells me, few of those who watched that night actually realized that Joseph was missing.

In the course of the Gospels Joseph gets very little press. In fact, the most important thing about Joseph, as far as I can tell, was that he happened to be born into the family of David. Mark never mentions Joseph at all in the Gospel that bears *his* name. John's only reference to him is to say that Jesus was "the son of Joseph." The Christmas story we usually hear, the one told by Luke about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, no room in the inn, Jesus being born and placed in a manger, the angels appearing to the shepherds, in that story, Joseph barely gets a mention. There is more material in the Gospels concerning the wise men and the shepherds than is written about Joseph. Yet the courageous decision that we hear about in this morning's Gospel lesson set the stage for all the glorious wonder we will celebrate in the week ahead of us.

As the story unfolds, we see that Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married, betrothed. Back in that time and in that culture, marriages were arranged by parents, and when the woman reached the age of thirteen or so, there would be a ceremony of betrothal which was as binding as marriage, except that the engaged couple did not yet live together. After about a year's engagement, the wedding would happen, and then the groom would take his bride to his home.

Well, somewhere along the way, between the engagement and the wedding, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. Maybe she was beginning to show. Maybe Mary told him. Maybe he heard it on the Galilean grapevine. We don't know. But you can *imagine* Joseph's reaction. He knows *he's* not the father. Mary tells him that she has not been unfaithful, that she is pregnant by the power of God. God's *Spirit* had created this new life within her. An angel of the Lord had even appeared to her to tell her so! But setting aside the rest of the story you know so well, if you were Joseph, would you have believed her?

I suspect that Joseph is hurt, wounded, grieving. He loves Mary. He had had hopes and dreams for the future. But now, that was all over. If Joseph stands on his rights, the letter of the law is clear. This situation is just as much adultery as if the marriage had already been completed, and the law knows what to do about *that*. The penalty for adultery is death – by stoning. But Joseph is a good man, a righteous man. He certainly can't have Mary stoned, or even publicly humiliated.

On the other hand, he certainly can't still marry her. I'd be willing to think that he might have *wanted* to, but the disgrace that would fall upon him and his family would make that impossible. Joseph could not dishonor the name of his father by marrying a woman carrying the child of another.

So he makes the only real choice that he has left. Unwilling to shame her, and unable to marry her, all the dreams he had had for their life together over, he decides that he'll just quietly divorce her. He won't insist on his legal rights. He won't make a public scene. He'll just quietly... leave.

Except that night God speaks to Joseph in a dream. An angel of the Lord appeared to him and says, "Hey, don't be afraid." "There's nothing to worry about here." "God is in control." "In fact," he says, "Mary's child is a gift of the Holy Spirit." "So go a head and marry her," he says. "Yes, she *will*

bear a child who is not yours.” “But this child is God’s gift to the world!” “Call him Jesus,” he says, “the savior of his people.”

And Joseph got up the next morning purposing in his heart to do *exactly* as the angel had said. He had the courage and the strength of will to go to Mary and marry her. In the face of what must have been tremendous pressure to do otherwise, Joseph decided to do the *right* thing. He decided to cast in his lot with Mary, and with Jesus, and with God. And something truly marvelous, something truly *miraculous* happened. God came and lived with them, and with us, in the person of Jesus Christ. Fully God, and fully human. At once invulnerable and dangerously defenseless. The grace of Christmas is Emmanuel, God *with* us.

The story of Christmas is not some fairy tale. Christmas does not represent a sentiment, or an idea, or even a *feeling* about God. The little town of Bethlehem was *real*. Ceasar and Herod were *real*. Death and slaughter and despair were *real* in first century Palestine. And in the midst of all of this, God himself had to be made just as real. And you know what? He wasn’t made real in an ideal, or in a philosophy, or in a fuzzy warm sentiment. God became real in the flesh. He was made real in human hands and in human feet and in human lips. He was made real in the baby held in Mary and Joseph’s warm embrace. That is what the Incarnation was all about. It still *is* what it’s all about.

The town in which *we* live is real. Barrack Obama and Bashar al-Assad are real. Madmen with bombs and shotguns are real. Death and hunger and despair are as real as *ever* they have been. And in the midst of it all, God *still* must be made real as well. But he isn’t made real in high sounding ideals. He isn’t made real in some complicated philosophy. He *certainly* isn’t made real in syrupy sugarplum sentimentality. God must take on *flesh* if the world is to recognize that he is real. Only this time around, the flesh that he wants to use is *yours* and *mine*. It is up to those of us who call ourselves Christians. It is up to us, in the flesh, to make God real to others. It is up to us to *be* the body of Christ to those who do not know him, and to those who so desperately *need* to experience his presence.

Like Joseph, we are called to cast in our lot... with God. Like Joseph, we are summoned to be part of God’s plan. Like Joseph, we are invited to participate in the Incarnation of God. If like Joseph we *accept* that call, then something miraculous can and *will* happen. God will come to you *and* to me, the spirit of God will overshadow us, and Christmas will happen again, in our hearts. Jesus the Christ will be born anew, in our lives. Life and light will begin to burst out, *all over*. “God is with us” is not just the translation of a Hebrew name given to the Babe of Bethlehem. Emmanuel is the translation of the living, loving purpose of God, to be present in and among his creation. And when that incarnation takes place within *us*, *we* become part of the plan. Where there was only doubt, there can be confidence. Where there was only despair, there can be hope. Where there was just a daunting muddling through, there can be an abundance of joy and purpose.

I urge you to let the week that is coming be a holy time for you. Don’t pass up this incredibly special opportunity to recognize, to sieze hold of, to *embrace* the presence of God which is, and has always been, all around you. Let it change you. And through *you*, let it change everything about your world.