12-10/11-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 1:18-25 Characters of Christmas: Joseph

This year at our Hanging of the Greens, the Joseph in the Fellowship Hall nativity had a bit of a problem—his head had come off. As Joseph was hidden away that evening, to be repaired the next day, someone asked, “Will anyone even notice if Joseph is gone?”

In most nativity scenes, if Joseph encounters an “accident”, he can be replaced by a shepherd.

In most Christmas plays, Joseph is the easiest character to cast at the last minute, in case of illness, for often Joseph has no speaking lines and only escorts Mary from place to place.

Joseph is one of the most neglected characters of the Christmas story.

Joseph is never regal like the wise men nor outgoing like the shepherds.

Joseph is neither a humble young maiden nor a brash wild prophet.

Try and find a Christmas hymn that belongs solely to Joseph. There are some modern songs that imagine Joseph’s words, yet there are no hymns that view the Christmas story directly through the lens of Joseph. Even “Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine” is more from the viewpoint of Mary than Joseph.

In the Gospel of Luke, Joseph is always on the fringes of the Christmas story, almost a footnote in Mary’s story. Yet in the Gospel of Matthew, the birth of Jesus hinges of the faithfulness of Joseph. Like any good supporting actor, the story cannot continue without the presence of Joseph—even if he never says one word.

..Martin Luther, in one of his Christmas sermons, said there were three miracles that occurred in Christ’s birth: God became human, a virgin conceived and Mary believed.

--Faith J. Conklin, “The third miracle.” in Homiletics 12-21-08

Reading through Matthew’s Christmas story I would add a fourth miracle- Joseph obeyed.

To take Mary as his wife and raise her child as his own son went against everything that Joseph had been raised to believe. Yet he did so out of faithful obedience to God.

Joseph was considered a “righteous man”, a faithful Jew who was obedient to the Law of Moses. His family lineage traced back to Abraham through King David. Yet Joseph lived in the small town of Nazareth, a rural village in the north of Israel. A woodworker and carpenter by trade, Joseph sought to build up a solid business which relied heavily on his reputation. So Joseph was a practical man who worked with his hands and tried to do what he thought was right in the eyes of God.

Like many young people dreaming and planning for the future, Joseph thought he had his life all planned out. He would be a faithful member of the Jewish synagogue; he would build up a good carpentry business; he would have a large family with his young wife Mary. Joseph could imagine teaching his sons the fine art of woodworking as well as the finer points of the word of God. He could imagine growing old with Mary, and then looking back over a life of hard work, family and faith.

Those plans were good, until real life interrupted. When Mary shared the unexpected news of her pregnancy, Joseph’s carefully planned out life was turned upside down. When she insisted the baby was from God, the long awaited Messiah, Joseph didn’t know what to think or say or do.

His dreams of a quiet future as a humble carpenter, an obedient Jew, and a loving husband and father were shattered. I imagine he was in shock that he chose so poorly for a wife. I imagine he was horrified that Mary would commit adultery and risk her life and both of their reputations. I imagine he was saddened that she had to blame the Holy Spirit rather than owning up to her own sinfulness.

Joseph struggled to believe her story and struggled with how to respond. He knew that he had never touched her, and he could not believe that his beloved would be brazen enough to allow another man to touch her. But the Holy Spirit of God as the Father? His Mary as the mother of God? That story seemed a bit too farfetched to be true.

Could it be possible that the Scriptures would be fulfilled in his lifetime, let alone in his family?

Chagrined but noble, righteous yet compassionate, Joseph struggled with what to do and how to respond to Mary’s unexpected news.

Nowadays, news of an unexpected pregnancy only becomes a headline story if the couple involved are celebrities, and then the news is more gossip than scandal. Nowadays, we are more inclined to be shocked by scandals in politics, on Wall Street, or by professional athletes than to be shocked by this decade’s birth statistics:

In 2013, \*48% of all first births were to unmarried women. \*The average age for childbearing is now lower than the average age for marriage. \*Only 23% of all unmarried births are to teenagers. Sixty percent are to women in their twenties.

-- washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/03/25/

nine-facts-about-marriage-and-childbirth-in-the-united-states

Day after day young women are facing the reality that they are suddenly and unexpectedly pregnant and young men are facing the struggle of whether to claim or reject their responsibility to the woman and the child. For those dealing with the unexpected news, unexpected pregnancies can be traumatic. But for society in general, the news is no longer shocking or scandalous.

In first century Palestine, however, Mary’s news would have been the talk of the town, a scandal that risked Joseph’s reputation as well as her own life.

For Mary was already legally bound to Joseph. In their time, marriage was a three step process.

First came the engagement, which was a transaction between the fathers of the bride and the groom, often when the woman was still a young girl.

Next came the betrothal, which lasted for about a year before the consummation of the marriage. During the betrothal stage the bride and groom were considered legally married, yet did not live together. Instead they spent time getting to know one another and preparing for their life together.

Only after the year of betrothal came the marriage, which began with a huge festival and communal celebration, after which the groom took his new wife to live with him and consummate the marriage.

Mary and Joseph were in the betrothal stage, legally bound together, when she became pregnant. Joseph knew the baby was not his, having not yet had sexual relations as husband and wife. The only way that he could break the betrothal was to give her a bill of divorce, branding Mary as an adulteress.

As a righteous man, Joseph struggled with what to do.

As a faithful Jew, he knew that the Law stated that he needed to publicly condemn her of adultery and lead the religious leaders in stoning her to death. Yet this was his intended, the woman he wanted to love and care for the rest of his life, and he was reluctant to publicly humiliate her and sentence her to death.

He wondered, ought he to find some way to send her away quietly, giving her a bill of divorce out of the public eye? Ought he to marry her, raise the child as his own, and risk ruining his own reputation?

Few people would believe Mary’s story that she was a pregnant virgin. That kind of thing just did not happen. Mary and Joseph would know the truth, but very few others would have the faith to believe that they had not consummated their marriage early.

.. In Eastern Orthodox icons of the Nativity, there is often a small scene depicted in the lower left corner: Joseph, sitting and glumly listening to a man talking to him. Sometimes, the iconographer depicts this man with some sinister-looking attributes, and sometimes just with the kind of expression one might see on one of the town’s gossips. Other times, the artist portrays this character as an imp, or a small devil. He represents this temptation, of social obligation and public opinion, that Joseph was feeling pressured by: “What will people think?” --Lisa Bellan-Boyer, 12-23-07 americanbible.org

Joseph was torn as to how to respond.

Reflecting on this scandal in the Christmas story, Pastor Howard Chapman would give his 9th grade Sunday School class the same exercise at this time every year. ... He would tell the class that scholars thought that Mary was the same age as they were, about 14 or so. He would then show them Deuteronomy 22, where according to Jewish law Joseph could have brought charges against Mary, and if found guilty, she could have been put to death. He would then divide up the class with all the boys on one side and all the girls on the other. The girls' assignment was to list all of Mary's options, while the boys were to list Joseph's.   
This usually would generate a lively discussion, especially once they realized they did not have to stick to nice, neat, happy-ending choices. With not much prompting, the students would generate quite a list. Mary could have...had an abortion, claimed she was raped, committed suicide, run away, etc., etc. Joseph, on the other hand, could have...brought her to trial, quietly sent her out of town, left town himself, eloped with her, made up a story, etc., etc.

In one particular class when all of these options were listed on the chalkboard, Pastor Chapman asked, "What does all this tell you?" The class was very quiet for a moment or two. Then John, the worst troublemaker in the bunch, said, "Wow! Look at all that could have gone wrong. God was really taking a risk." -- Howard Chapman, via PresbyNet, 12/17/98

as told by David Leininger 12/21/03 leiningers.com

How true the words of that young man—God was really taking a risk. God was taking a risk by coming to earth and seeking to show us the way of salvation when the prophets and the Scriptures had already been rejected. God was taking an even bigger risk by having to entrust ordinary human beings to become the parents and caretakers of the son of God.

Did you catch verse 19 in the Scripture from Matthew today? In the NIV verse 19 reads: “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” Verse 19 in The Message reads: “Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.” Joseph didn’t believe Mary!

Joseph, as a righteous man who sought to obey the Law of Moses, a man of faith yet filled with compassion for Mary, initially did not believe her story about the Holy Spirit.

So Joseph made a decision he thought was best according to his faith and their circumstances.

He could not condemn her to death. Instead, Joseph made up his mind to quietly divorce her and send her away. She and the child would still be shunned by synagogue and community, but at least they would still be alive.

His decision made, Joseph rested—and that is when God changed Joseph’s mind. The Scriptures proclaim: “An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

‘Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife,

because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus,

because he will save his people from their sins.’”

Joseph, being a righteous and faithful man, knew that obedience to the Lord was a higher calling than fulfilling the Law’s ordinance to have Mary stoned or sent away. Joseph, being a practical man, struggled to put much stock in dreams, yet could not deny that was how he heard a word from the Lord.

So forgoing the marriage feast, the communal celebration, and even his rights to consummate the marriage at that time, Joseph quietly obeyed the command of the Lord and took Mary to his house as his wife, claiming her son as his own, risking his own reputation.

I love how modern day songwriter Steven Curtis Chapman describes Joseph’s decision in his song *Precious Promise*:

“Oh what a precious promise

Oh what a gift of love

Joseph makes his choice to do

What few men would have done

To take Mary as his bride

When she’s already carrying a child

That isn’t his own

Oh what a precious promise

Mary and the child will have a home”

--Precious Promise from the CD The Music of Christmas, 1995

What Joseph might have thought about Jesus as the one who saves, as Emmanuel, God with us, we will never know. His thoughts are not recorded in the Bible, not like Mary’s pondering events in her heart.

.. Angels bring heavenly greetings. Mary sings a praiseful solo. Wise men worship. Shepherds preach. Yet Joseph is silent. No notable lines are attributed to him. No sound bites. No quotes, only silence. -- Bruce Ritter sermoncentral.com 12-01

Never in all of the Christmas story does Joseph ever utter a word. Instead, his actions speak volumes of his abiding faithfulness, to God and to Mary.

Not once, not twice, but three times in the Scriptures practical Joseph receives an angelic messenger in a dream and three times Joseph acts upon the word of God received in those dreams.

Marry Mary. Flee to Egypt. Return to Nazareth. Three times Joseph is called to trust God and step out in faith, uncertain of the future yet knowing God will be with him in that future.

Joseph committed to be a faithful earthly father to Jesus. He vowed to watch over Mary and Jesus, and he did, in Bethlehem, in Egypt, and then back in Nazareth. He taught Jesus the trade of a carpenter. He taught Jesus the Torah, the Law of God’s people. He taught Jesus to trust in God.

Not only did Joseph accept Jesus, Joseph adopted Jesus. Legally Jesus became Joseph’s firstborn son, with claim to all property and privileges any firstborn son would have. This legal adoption was especially critical as shown in the beginning of chapter 1 in the Gospel of Matthew—Jesus was given the lineage of Joseph, and could rightfully be called Son of Abraham and Son of David. The prophecy of the Messiah was fulfilled through this lineage.

The one thing Joseph did not do was to give Jesus any of his ancestral names. Like Zechariah naming his son John, Joseph was once again faithful and obedient to God, offering his son the name Jesus as well as Emmanuel.

Remember at that time there was power in a name, and Jesus means “God saves” and Emmanuel means “God is with us.” God sent Jesus to save us from sin, to cleanse us for a right relationship with God, and to remind us that we are not alone, for God is with us.

This was good news to Joseph and Mary long ago, and it is still good news to us today.

If God can be with Joseph, an ordinary yet righteous carpenter, if God can be with Mary, an ordinary poor young woman, if God can be in the midst of a scandal, and in the midst of a manger, then God can be with us. In the midst of the struggles and sorrows and celebrations of our lives, God is with us. And if God is with us, who or what can be against us?

Joseph’s story reminds us that life may not go in the direction we expect. God’s plan for our lives may take us in an entirely different direction than what we have planned or what we have hoped for.

I don’t know about you, but if someone had told me 30 years ago the path my life has taken, I would not have believed it. If someone had told me 30 years ago that I would be preaching this year back in my home area, I would have scoffed at living this close to home, let alone being a female preacher. At that time I already suspected I would be the sibling farthest away from home, and at that time I had no female pastors as role models.

God’s plan for our lives may also put us more in the supporting actor role than the lead actor.

Not everyone will be a preacher or teacher or missionary. Many more will be mentors and trustees and helpers and prayer warriors. Yet no matter our role, God calls us to be faithful in following God’s ways. Like Joseph, maybe God’s plan hinges on our faithful obedience.

Like Joseph, we are called in this Advent season to live in faithful obedience to God’s call.

And like Joseph, we may not always see the promises of God fulfilled. Joseph did not live long enough to see Jesus active in ministry, let alone die on a cross and rise from the dead. Regardless of whether or not we see the promises of God fulfilled, we are still called to live by hope, and living by hope means living in faithful obedience to God.

Life is full of choices. Will we choose to go our own way, or choose to follow God’s ways? Will we choose to trust God’s plan, taking that plan one step at a time, or choose to follow our own paths, even if they take us away from God? Will we choose to believe in Christ as Emmanuel, God with us, or choose to believe that God wants nothing to do with our lives?

How we choose to believe will influence how we live, and how we live will influence our witness in this world.

As we continue on in this journey of Advent, let us give thanks for Joseph. My prayer for each of us today is that we will choose to live by faith as Joseph did, in faithful obedience to God’s call, wherever that call takes us.

May it be so.