

In our Gospel lesson this morning from Matthew, we don't hear about a manger or shepherds. We don't hear about cattle and sheep. But, we do hear about angels; in fact, a specific angel who gives a specific message to a specific man who has lots of things on his mind.

This morning we hear about the events leading up to the birth of Jesus as seen through the eyes of his earthly father, Joseph.

We don't know a lot about Joseph. The Gospels don't exactly give us a lot of information about Joseph, do they? In fact, there is more space devoted to discussion of the Wise Men and the shepherds than there is to Joseph. Matthew is the only one of the four Gospel writers who has anything of substance to say about Joseph. Mark overlooks him completely, Luke mentions him only in passing, and John's only reference to him is simply, "Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph" (John 1:45). It could be that the early church was afraid that if Jesus were associated too closely with Joseph the doctrine of the Virgin Birth would be somehow compromised. We don't know for sure. But, for whatever reason, Joseph has never had more than a cameo role in the biggest drama of the Bible, the Nativity.

We do know that he was descended from King David. We know that he was a carpenter by trade. We know that he was engaged to Mary and, like her, was probably a teenager, probably just a few years older than his bride to be. We know that he was a just man. We know that the current situation of Mary's pregnancy...a child that he knew wasn't his was quite troubling to him.

We assume that he must have loved Mary...something quite unusual in a time of arranged marriages. We assume this because his reaction was also unusual to the times.

You see, unlike the engagements of today which can come and go on a whim, engagement in the world of Joseph and Mary was a binding arrangement, a contract if you will, between people who were already legally considered to be husband and wife, and unfaithfulness was considered adultery and the engagement could only be dissolved by death or divorce. And to make matters worse, the penalty for adultery among the Jews who kept the law was death. So you can imagine the position that this placed Joseph in.

Joseph must have loved Mary because, although he would be disgraced by the revelation of her pregnancy, the disgrace would have been unbearable if the community knew that the child was not his. So he resolved to clear up this terrible problem by divorcing Mary quietly. This would allow Mary to leave the community and possibly begin a new life in a new community among distant family members.

So, as Joseph thinks that he has solved this problem, he goes to bed. But while he sleeping, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and says:

‘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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’

Now imagine what that must have been like. And how did Joseph react? The rest of the passage tells us that:

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

To me, this reaction is one of the things that make Joseph so special, God gives him something to do and he does it...no questions asked.

Moses didn't react that way when God called him to bring his people up out of Egypt. He protested saying that he had a speech impediment and had trouble speaking in a crowd.

Jonah didn't react that way when God called him to go to Nineveh and preach for the repentance of the Ninevites. Jonah did just the opposite, he ran as far away from what God was calling him to do...and we all know where that got him.

In both of these cases, with Moses and Jonah, they both eventually give in to God and perform the tasks that are given to them.

But Joseph is different; he does just what God tells him to do in that dream. And he will continue to follow the commands that he receives in dreams...the command to go to Egypt because the child is in danger. The command to return from Egypt once the danger is clear and the warning to make a new home in the district of Galilee in the town of Nazareth.

Joseph followed God's order without question and without objection. He just got up and did it! This tells us a lot about the character of Joseph. He trusted visions and insights, responding to the activity of God in mind and in heart. He didn't go looking for something to explain away the holy and mysterious nature of God, as we so often do. Joseph simply trusted and obeyed. "Is that what you want me to do, Lord? Piece of cake! Consider it done." Is there a greater testimony to faith than that?

You see, for Joseph to simply accept what he was told to do was NOT a "piece of cake," it wasn't an easy thing. It meant going through the days of anguish and misunderstanding without questioning. It meant putting his own plans for the life that he had envisioned for himself and Mary on hold, attending instead to the life of the baby who was destined to be something and someone that Joseph could not begin to imagine. It meant setting aside

his own human desires, living with Mary in celibacy until the birth of the child. It meant accepting, caring for, providing for, and loving a child whose origins he wasn't sure he understood. "Piece of cake?" I don't think so! And all because an angel had appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "This is what God wants you to do...." Joseph listened, trusted, and obeyed. Do you still think we don't know much about Joseph?

Absolutely *nothing* went the way Joseph had planned – not the wedding, not the celebration, not the birth of their first child with the help of a midwife in the secure shelter of a home he had provided – NOTHING! All of Joseph's expectations had been altered. Instead there was shame and scorn; there was an uncomfortable journey to a place where there was no room; and there was the birth of the child, with no one to help except Joseph himself. No, things definitely *did not* go as Joseph had planned.

But, you know, somehow I can't believe that Joseph ever really felt despair in the way things worked out. Now, don't get me wrong – I think Joseph knew heartache and disappointment and fear and confusion – all these things. But I don't think despair ever entered the picture for Joseph, because Joseph knew God, and he was confident that God would provide whatever was needed.

That's why we need to examine the character of Joseph today. Joseph's experience of altered expectations, of things going wrong, not turning out the way they were planned, is so much like our own life experience, isn't it? We think things will go one way, and before we know it they fly off in a completely different direction! Just when we think we have it all figured out, that we've learned the game, somebody changes the rules! We start out in Nazareth, in familiar surroundings, and suddenly we find ourselves in the middle of Bethlehem, in the midst of chaos. The difference

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between hope and despair lies in whether we recognize that God is with us, that we don't have to face the chaos and confusion alone.

God does not create trouble or disappointment for us. God stands with us in the face of all our altered expectations. Joseph's strength, his compassion, his courage all flowed from his constant faith in God's abiding presence.

In this season of Advent, as we wonder at Mary's quiet sense of calm, as we admire the tenacity of the Wise Men on their journey, as we share the excitement of the shepherds, let us also look to the quiet figure of Joseph, the forgotten one. Let us learn from Joseph the lesson of unwavering trust that will empower us to cope with the disappointments, the surprises, the altered expectations, and the often-devastating realities of life, and trust that God will provide.

As you arrange the Nativity scene on your coffee table or on your fireplace mantle or underneath your Christmas tree – wherever you place it – put the Wise Men and the shepherds around the Christ child, for there is the center of sanity in a large, crazy world. But don't forget Joseph. Put him even nearer to the Christ child. He's earned his place there. Because Joseph – the forgotten one, who just sort of hangs around the stable like a doorman or something and doesn't have any lines in the Christmas pageant – has much to teach us about the Christmas story, and about unwavering faith.

May we have the faith and the courage to be like Joseph. To say yes without hesitation when God calls us.

Thanks be to God.