

December 24, 2006

SERIES: Advent 2006

SERMON: **The Forgotten Father: Joseph's Journey of Faith**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 1:18-25

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

I want to thank you for the many cards and expressions of kindness and love we have received over the past ten days since my father died. The funeral service was a bitter/sweet experience—so many tears and so much joy. He was a remarkable man and we will miss him dearly. I want to publicly thank three of my colleagues—Tom Kluge, Wink Nolte, and Phil Thengvall—for making the long drive to Arkansas to attend the funeral. And I am so appreciative of Dick High for doing something I'm sure neither of us have done before—preach someone else's sermon. I can't imagine how difficult that must be, but I thought it was important in order to maintain the continuity of this Advent series. Thanks, Dick.

Now this morning I would like to turn your attention to the third most important person in the Nativity Story. We have spoken of Jesus: Son of Man, Son of God; we have examined His Amazing Mother. And now I would like for us to meditate on His Forgotten Father. Why do I call him that? I have several dozen books in my library which are biographies of Bible Characters. Among these are two books entitled, *Great Personalities of the New Testament* and *Some Minor Characters in the New Testament*. Now you would think that almost any NT character would fit into one of those two categories, because “great” and “minor” pretty well covers the gamut. But neither of these books, nor any of the others I have, contains a character sketch of Joseph, the husband of Mary and the stepfather of Jesus. Mary appears in nearly every one of them, and rightly so. But while acknowledging her favored status above all women, we should not overlook the fact that God also handpicked a unique man to serve as His Son's earthly “father.”

One of the first things we discover as we set out to do a character study of Joseph is that our biblical resources are somewhat limited. There are only nine separate references to Joseph in the NT. In examining and evaluating those nine references I find that they fall into three main themes: Joseph's humble origin and status, his sensitive reaction to Mary's difficult dilemma, and his godly response to God's incredible revelation.

Look for those themes in our Scripture reading this morning—Matt. 1:18-25.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 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.

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—

which means, “God with us.”

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Joseph was a man of humble origin and status.

He was a carpenter by trade. (Matt. 13:55) And the carpenter’s union was very weak in those days. The carpenter was not considered a skilled craftsman, as he is today; in fact, the term “carpenter” is probably better translated as “contractor” or “builder.” Joseph was probably equivalent to a day laborer in our time. The fact that he was at the poverty level can be seen in the sacrifice which he and Mary brought to the Temple when they presented and dedicated their Son to the Lord. It was an offering permitted only for the poor—a pair of doves or two young pigeons (Luke 2:24).

He was a layman in a priestly society. (Luke 2:22-24) The power and the influence in that day lay not with politicians or athletes or Hollywood stars, as in our day, but with priests. The situation was not unlike what we see in a country like Iran today, where the clergy call the shots religiously, politically, socially, and legally. But Joseph was a layman in a day when the distinction between laity and clergy was much greater than it is today.

He was engaged to a peasant girl. The engagement of Joseph to Mary is mentioned in both Matt. 1:18 and Luke 2:5. The fact that she was a peasant is a deduction from the entire account. She obviously had no more resources than Joseph and no other status than her own character.

To summarize, Joseph was an ordinary man of very humble means. He was ordinary socially, professionally, and religiously. But there are at least two ways in which he was extraordinary.

Joseph reacted with extreme sensitivity to Mary’s difficult dilemma.

Joseph’s sensitivity didn’t begin with the startling news that Mary was pregnant. It started with the respect he showed to her as soon as they were betrothed, undoubtedly through an arranged marriage.

He treated her with love and respect *before* she became pregnant. Matt. 1:18 says, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but *before* they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” Mary and Joseph were engaged. Indeed, they were more than engaged, for betrothal in first century Judaism was far more binding than our modern engagement period. In parts of the Near East even today betrothal is the only legal ceremony connected with marriage. So binding was this engagement period that a legal divorce decree was necessary in order to break it. But despite the virtual certainty that they would become man and wife, Joseph did not take advantage of Mary.

Unfortunately, this kind of self-control is becoming increasingly rare in our day. I saw an interview on *Anderson 360* the other day where an expert was citing surveys indicating that the incidence of premarital sex is now over 90%. An alien could not watch TV for an hour without concluding that sleeping around is as normal for singles in our culture as is eating or going to work. While committed Christians would never openly condone such promiscuity, there are many who engage in what might be called intimacy by anticipation. They think that if they are in a serious relationship, really love the other person, and intend to get married, then it's OK to anticipate marriage by being intimate before they are actually married. William Barclay writes perceptively of this view:

There is no question here of promiscuity, or of what one might call deliberate immorality. There is simply the anticipation of that which will, as they believe certainly, be some day their right.

There are two things to be said here. The first is that it would be equally possible to say that they love each other so much that they will not be intimate until they are totally and irrevocably committed to each other . . . , that love has taught them that self-control, self-discipline and self-giving are very closely connected.

The second thing is that nothing is certain in this life, and it is not certain that they will marry. All of us have seen two people who seemed utterly certain to marry, but who in the end did not. The human heart is not so completely predictable that anyone can take its future movements for granted. It is not wise to anticipate that which we have neither the right nor the power to anticipate.¹

Joseph refused to compromise his own or Mary's purity and refused to rationalize any behavior that was less than godly.

Even after Mary became pregnant, Joseph desired to protect her from disgrace by pursuing a quiet annulment of their engagement. Matt. 1:19 says, "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." Do you realize what that is saying? It is saying that the righteous person doesn't have to condemn others while being righteous himself. Sadly there are some people who are more self-righteous than righteous; they not only hate sin but also hate sinners. It is admirable to have high standards of morality, but if we come across as mean-spirited and unloving, then we have abandoned God's way of responding to sin.

I'm impressed that Joseph, though convinced that a heinous sin has occurred—against himself and against God—still pursues the course of forgiveness and protection of the allegedly guilty one. And God calls him "righteous" for it. But please don't miss the fact that while Matthew tells us that Joseph was righteous; it does not tell us he was untroubled by the news he learned from Mary. In fact, I think the truth must lie in quite a different direction. Here is what I suspect we might have heard from Joseph had we been there shortly after Mary informed him that she was going to have a baby:

You're watching my hands, aren't you, Mary? They tremble. See how they tremble! My hands so strong, so clever at working with tools. I can't even trust them

anymore. There isn't much I can trust, is there, Mary? This situation between us is killing me.

I want so much to believe. Of course I believe! I believe in God, I believe in His mighty angels, I believe in His kingdom. But this story—I simply cannot accept it. Who are we, who are you, Mary, that the Almighty should come to you, speak to you, choose you—and leave you in this condition? You tell me that the "power of the Most High overshadowed you." What does that mean, Mary? Do shadows make babies?

All right! Supposing merciful God, for some reason, wanted to bless you. Is this is blessing? Would God give you a blessing that destroys? Would he give my beloved a child that isn't mine?

Think of it, Mary. For four centuries now God has not spoken. Ever since the great prophet Malachi told our forefathers to wait for another Elijah, no prophet has appeared. Elijah has not returned. And now, my lovely Mary, the meekest of the maidens of Galilee, tells me that God has spoken to her, that God has performed a miracle within her, and that He has placed the Messiah in her body!

I do not wish to hurt you, my beloved. I can read the pain in your eyes. But I can also tell that your sorrow is for me, not for yourself. And that baffles me. I keep searching your face for a trace of guilt and find none. I wait for the flush of shame to overcome you in some unguarded moment, but there is no shame. Instead, I only detect that faint, undefinable look of peace which I cannot understand. How can you respond this way, Mary?

This will be difficult for me to tell you, and even harder to do. But I must. There is no other way. Our laws provide for denouncing your unfaithfulness before the rulers of the synagogue. But don't fear, Mary. You betrayed me, but I won't betray you. On the other hand, you must understand that we cannot go on with our plans to be married. This thing would always stand between us. So I have made my decision. We will let everybody believe that this is my child, and I'll give you a letter of release. You'll live your life, and I'll go my way. You'll carry your burden, and I my sorrow.ⁱⁱ

We have seen how Joseph reacted with extreme sensitivity to Mary. But there's an even greater reason to admire him.

Joseph responded in a godly way when “the miracle” was revealed to him.

Joseph stands with a handful of biblical heroes—like Noah, Abraham, Daniel and Paul—as one who obeyed God under the most difficult of circumstances.

He demonstrated implicit obedience to God. Not once, but on at least four occasions Joseph responded obediently when he was asked by God to do something that contradicted common sense. Joseph preferred the uncommon sense of obedience to the word of the Lord to the common sense of human rationalization.

The first and best-known example is, of course, found in the passage we read earlier from Matthew 1. An angel of the Lord told Joseph that Mary was indeed a virgin, that her child was

conceived of the Holy Spirit, and that he should take her home as his wife. And verse 24 records his response to this dream: “When Joseph woke up, he *did* what the angel of the Lord commanded him.” That’s remarkable in that Joseph was asked to believe something that had never happened before in history and, in fact, has never happened since. Not only was he asked to believe it but also to act upon it. And he did.

Let’s eavesdrop again on Joseph:

Mary! Mary! Quick, open the door! He came; and angel came to me! I had been struggling for hours between sleep and nightmares. I was alone. But suddenly there was someone else. The intensity was unbearable, but when He spoke, the voice was gentle, almost friendly, as if He knew me. He said, "Joseph, son of David. Do not hesitate to take Mary for your wife. For that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son. And you shall call his name Yeshua, for he will save his people from their sins."

And now, Mary, I implore you to forgive me for my suspicion. You are chosen of the Lord. You are blessed among women, and the child of your womb is holy. I know it now. God found you humble, pure, obedient and strong. And He has exalted you.

Mary, do you wonder at all what manner of man He will be? Will he be truly human like the rest of us? He will surely have your complexion and your hair. His eyes will crinkle up and sparkle like yours when you smile. Perhaps He will get the broad shoulders and big hands of your father. Imagine who He will be . . . He will be born the Son of the Most High. That's what the angel told me last night. Does that mean that all the ancient promises will be fulfilled in Him? Mary, is it possible that your son will one day become king?ⁱⁱⁱ

"And Joseph rose from His sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. . ." What a remarkable demonstration of implicit obedience! But that is only the initial example recorded for us. In Matt. 2 there are three other examples in which Joseph obeyed: when God told him to go to Egypt (which will be our topic next week), when God told him to return to Israel after Herod's death, and when God told him to go to Galilee to the town of Nazareth. For different reasons none of those decisions was “the rational thing” to do, but each was commanded by God, and in each case Joseph obeyed explicitly.

He also practiced intense devotion to God. (Luke 2:39; 4:16) The first evidence of this is in Luke 2:39, just after Jesus was dedicated by his parents in the Temple in Jerusalem. We read, “When Joseph and Mary had done *everything* required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.” Joseph’s devotion to God is seen here in his complete obedience to the Law. This was not normal; it was abnormal. In the 1400 years since God had given the Law to Moses much of it had fallen into disuse, especially the ceremonial law, and the people who kept its provisions faithfully were few and far between. Joseph was one of the few, part of the faithful remnant.

Another hint at Joseph’s devotion is seen just two verses later, in Luke 2:41. It says of Jesus, “*Every year* his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.” This was above and

beyond the call of duty. The rabbis of the day had officially dropped the OT rule that required a Jewish man to attend three annual feasts in Jerusalem. Now a man had to attend only one of the three feasts, and if he lived a certain distance from Jerusalem he only had to attend once in his lifetime. Yet we discover that Joseph came every year and not just by himself!—he brought his whole family. The time and expense involved in such a trip would be parallel to a Christian man today taking his whole family to a week-long Bible conference every summer. (Some of our families do that and I honor them for it).

But Joseph's devotion to God is seen not only in his complete obedience to the law and in the annual pilgrimages he made to Jerusalem, but also in his weekly practice. This is seen by inference from Luke 4:16, which is part of a narrative from the adult life of our Lord. It says, "He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, *as was his custom*. And he stood up to read." Notice that Christ was in Nazareth where He had been raised; and Luke says it was his custom to go to the synagogue. Customs are generally habits developed in childhood. I have no doubt that every week as a lad Jesus was in the synagogue, worshiping with His family.

Parents, I'm going to ask a tough question this morning: What kind of impression are we giving our children about the importance of corporate worship in our own lives? I see two common tendencies in Christian families today; they are polar opposites, and frankly neither is healthy. Some parents are so involved in church life that they end up neglecting their family responsibilities (this can even happen to pastors; maybe I should say especially to pastors). In a church this size there is something going on 8 or 9 evenings a week, or so it seems, and almost all of it is good, but no one can or should participate in all of it. We have to examine our priorities and pick those opportunities that are going to bring the maximum spiritual growth *and* the maximum opportunity to serve others.

However, the narcissism that has infiltrated our whole society has also invaded the lives of many Christians, and there are many families on the other end of the spectrum who identify any involvement in church activities outside of a Sunday morning worship service as interference in their family life or career. Even Sunday services are attended only when convenient. They do not view the church as a central influence but rather as an adjunct. And that is not healthy either.

One of the things I have noticed over the years is that many of these parents seem surprised when their children fail to get involved in church when they go away to college or establish their own careers. I got an email from a family that attended First Free in St. Louis many years ago. It was great to hear from them, but I was struck by one particular comment:

Our son is a sophomore at _____ University. He is well over 6'2" and we are thankful he is active in Campus Crusade and also Intersarsity—this after not attending church for his last couple years of highschool after getting involved in ice hockey for a few years in a youth league that caused him and me to miss church. We are glad he is starting to be interested in the Lord again . . . Praise God!

Well, I praise God with them, but frankly I think they took a pretty significant risk in allowing that to happen in the first place. Many families that take that path will discover that their children never return to the habit of worship.

I believe there has to be a balance between these extremes. We should not allow church programs and religious activities to consume us, yet we should view the house of God and the family of God as indispensable for growth, worship, fellowship, and outreach. We can learn something from Joseph in this regard.

He assumed parental responsibility for Jesus' growth and development. (Luke 2:40). Apparently from the very moment the angel first spoke to Joseph in a dream he never questioned his responsibility to be a father to the special child that God had brought into his and Mary's lives. In Luke 2:40 it says, "And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him." I think it would be a mistake if we were to draw the conclusion that God just miraculously and mysteriously produced the results seen in this verse. God's grace often, perhaps usually, works through human agents, and the human agent most prominent here in Luke 2:40 surely is Joseph, His stepfather. Joseph provided the work experience, the nurture, the discipline, and the love that allowed Jesus to develop into young manhood.

And I'm sure it wasn't entirely an easy task for Joseph. We might be tempted to dream about the joy of rearing a perfect child. Frankly, I think having a perfect child in the home probably created some peculiar challenges for Jesus' parents. Several times we are told that they were amazed or astonished at Jesus. And why not? There are many of us who would be astonished if our child were perfect for one day, much less continually. And let us not forget that Joseph and Mary had at least six other children besides Jesus who were *not* perfect. Imagine the tensions that could rise in a family where all the children get disciplined except one. I have a strong suspicion that jealousy may have been one of the key reasons why Jesus' half-brothers and sisters did not believe in Him until after the resurrection.

I'll say this, too: Joseph himself was not perfect, yet God gave him the responsibility of rearing one who was. There have been times when I have wronged my sons by assuming something I shouldn't have, or by disciplining in anger, or by just taking out my own personal frustrations upon them. I find it very hard to go to them and confess that wrong and ask their forgiveness. Imagine how often Joseph had to do that with his child.

We hear nothing more of Joseph after the temple incident when Jesus was 12. We do not know when he died, though Mary seems clearly to be a widow by the time Jesus begins His earthly ministry. Yet we continue to see Joseph's godly character etched into the life of Mary's son. What part of that was due to Jesus' divine nature and what part was due to the training He received in the home, we cannot say.

I would like to challenge us, particularly the fathers who are present, to learn from the godly life and attitudes of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Many of us are ordinary like him, but we can also be like him in another way—extraordinary in our family relationships and our response to God.

Conclusion: In closing this morning I want to remind us of one well-known incident in Joseph's life. Joseph was bringing his wife to Bethlehem for registration when her baby was due. Seeking lodging for her, he discovered there was "no room." So Jesus had to be born in a place set aside for animals. Just for a moment I want you to think, especially you men, about the impact this situation must have had on Joseph, and what it would have had on *you*. Most men I know pride themselves on being able to take care of their families, and when they lose their jobs or become disabled or for some other reason are frustrated in their efforts to meet the needs of their families, they are devastated. Imagine how Joseph must have felt as a husband and father when the only place available for his wife to have their first child was an animal shelter!

Still, Joseph's frustration was insignificant compared to the frustration that our Heavenly Father feels (can we use that word "frustration" of God?) when His Son seeks admission into the lives of people whom He has created and loved and gifted and called, and yet they respond by saying "the guest room is full."

God loves you so much that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. That includes you! I urge you to admit Him into your heart and life today!

i. William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, 148.

ii. I found this account years ago and have edited it several times but I do not know who wrote it. If any reader recognizes it, I would appreciate knowing so I could footnote it properly.

iii. See footnote above.