

**FOCUS: The Good News is that even as we await celebrating the birth of the Christ Child, we await with patience the coming again of our Lord and Savior. (Fourth in a series)**

For the last six weeks, we have heard a consistent theme in the lessons on Sunday morning. We have been focusing, from the end of the last church year to the beginning of the new, on the second coming of Christ as King of kings and Ruler of all. In the last three weeks, this message has been colored by the promise and prophesy of the first coming, or Incarnation. However, today's lessons focus specifically on the first coming—the birth of Jesus. We still have about 36 hours on the calendar until the Nativity of our Lord, but we hear a message of His birth as a foretaste of that which is to come. The Scripture readings tell us “Now!” even as the calendar says “Not yet!”

As we prepare for and celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, we hear a great deal about Mary. Last week, we heard the words of the Magnificat as our response to the Old Testament reading. On Christmas Eve, we will hear Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, and in it, Luke's emphasis on Mary. However, today we hear about Joseph and the first of three dreams he had. It's easy to overlook Joseph and his importance to the birth of Jesus. After all, he is not the biological father of Jesus, and he really doesn't appear in any of the accounts of Jesus' life after Jesus is twelve years old. But truly, Joseph plays a very important role, and provides us a great example of what it means to be a father.

Matthew's Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus. In it, Matthew seeks to establish that Jesus is a descendant of David and Abraham. Yet, in a society so ingrained to patriarchy, Matthew includes four women in the genealogical record—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife—in addition to Mary. The genealogy came to Matthew by tradition, we assume, since not all of the names listed appear in the Old Testament record. This genealogy is important, particularly to the Jewish Christians who made up Matthew's primary audience. Matthew provides this genealogy, based in great part on the accounts provided in the Septuagint—the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures written in Alexandria, Egypt, in the last three centuries before the birth of Christ—to make clear two very important issues. First, that Jesus is part of the royal house of David, from whom all the messianic figures—the anointed ones of God—came. Second, that Jesus was a descendent of Abraham, through whom God promised to bless and make God's Chosen People. In this way, Matthew establishes Jesus as the one who was to come to fulfill the promise of God.

Matthew makes Joseph an important figure in his Gospel. Perhaps this is because Matthew is writing to a Jewish community, and they place a great deal of importance on the father in determining lineage and inheritance. To be a part of the royal line, one had to be born to a father in the royal line. How then do we explain the place of Jesus in the genealogy, given that Joseph is not the natural father of Jesus?

The last verse of our Gospel this morning speaks volumes to us, although it is quite easy to overlook, or underestimate, its importance when we read it from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective. However, its importance would have been quite clear to its first century hearer. Matthew writes, “and he named him Jesus.” To name a person was, in our context, to legally adopt that person as one's own flesh and blood. Even though Joseph was not the birth father, he stepped forward as the adoptive parent and said to Mary and all around him, “This child is mine and a member of my household.” From that point forward, legally speaking, Jesus was the son of Joseph and a descendent of David.

Why did Joseph do this? What was the motivating factor that led him to disobey the Law? You see, the Law was clear. A woman who became pregnant out of wedlock was to be executed, or

at the very least banished from the community. So here is Mary, pregnant by the work of the Holy Spirit, but having absolutely no way to defend herself against charges of adultery or infidelity. And Joseph, “being a righteous man,” which meant he was one who followed the letter of the Law, decides to do something that was *against* the Law and not publicly disclose Mary’s pregnancy, which would have disgraced her family and led directly to her death.

Throughout the history of the Hebrew people, dreams and visits by angels—messengers of God—were a common motif. Throughout the Hebrew Scripture, we find account after account of prophets receiving the Word of God through dreams. Matthew’s Jewish audience would have known this, and to that extent, would have understood Joseph’s dream to be an expected method through which the Word of God would have been transmitted. Joseph will have other dreams—to leave the country for Egypt and to return from Egypt. So, after he has considered what to do, and makes a decision that is not in accordance with the Law, but shows a great deal of mercy and compassion, an angel of the Lord comes to him while he sleeps and brings Joseph a message from God. The angel reassures Joseph that Mary is pregnant by the work of the Holy Spirit, not of some unknown human male, and the child she is to have is not just special, but truly the promised Messiah—God Incarnate. The angel reminds Joseph of the prophecy of Isaiah: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and *they* shall name him Emmanuel.”<sup>1</sup>

And so Joseph, rather than quietly dismissing Mary as his fiancée and moving on with his life, took her as his wife and stood by her and with her during her pregnancy. When ordered by the Roman occupying forces to return to his familial village of Bethlehem for the census, he took his pregnant wife and began the 70-plus mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where they would present themselves—husband and wife and, most likely, infant son—to be counted.

Joseph didn’t *have* to do this. As a righteous man, one who followed the Law to the last letter, he could have simply denounced Mary’s pregnancy publicly and all would have been forgotten. But instead, he decided to find a way to quietly end the engagement and allow the young woman to maintain her life, as well as her dignity. As he slept, a messenger of the Lord came to him and opened his eyes and his heart with a message from God. “Do not be afraid,” the messenger told Joseph.

And Joseph was not afraid. Instead of dismissing her, he took her as his wife and stood with her, protecting her and loving her. He waited through the many months with her, anticipating the day when the child would be born. He traveled with her in anxiousness and fear from their home in Nazareth to a strange village miles away. When the time of anticipation and waiting became one of excitement and urgency, Joseph sought out a safe, warm, and clean place for her. And when the infant boy was born in the dark, smelly stable, Joseph was there with her and the child. And he named the child Jesus, and raised him as his own son.

So many questions. So few answers. Joseph, the model stepfather, lived in anticipation as Jesus grew. What did the messenger mean when he told Joseph that Jesus would “save the people from their sins”? What would it mean to have Emmanuel, “God with us,” living under his roof?

Joseph, being a righteous man, took Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son. Thanks be to God for the witness of Joseph!

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14 (NRSV)