

Advent 4 A December 22, 2019
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The Man in the Background
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

If you do a google search on Joseph, the results are pretty limited. When I was researching this sermon, I did find one story about Joseph that I thought summed up the lack of material. The story is about a children's Christian formation director at a church who got a phone call a few days before Christmas from the mother of one of the children in the church's Christmas pageant. The mother apologized and said her child, who was playing Joseph in the pageant, had become ill and would not be able to participate. In response to this news, the Christian formation director believed there wasn't enough time to replace the child and decided to write Joseph out of the pageant that year. Which she did. And no one noticed Joseph's absence.

Which perhaps shouldn't surprise us that much. Joseph tends to be relegated to the background of the Christmas story. I've read dozens of picture books telling the birth of Jesus through the eyes of the animals in the stable, the shepherds in the fields, the angels, I've even read one about the guy who built the stable. There are dozens of devotionals about Mary and her courage and faith and trust by saying yes to God. But I have yet to find one book that explores the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective, just a few articles or chapters here and there. When Marsha, our Music Minister here at Church of the Good Shepherd and I talked about today's church service we struggled to think of a hymn that features Joseph.

Joseph is mentioned only briefly in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, and only Matthew gives us the small bit we heard today about Joseph's role in Christ's birth. The Church, in its wisdom, doesn't give us Joseph's story during the Christmas season; we hear it just once every three years on this fourth and final Sunday in the season of Advent.

Scholars have a little to say about him. Some tell us Joseph and his dreams from today's Gospel are the author's way of setting up Jesus as the new Moses who will liberate all humanity from sin just as Moses liberated God's people from the oppression Pharaoh of Egypt. For this isn't the first Joseph we've read about in the Bible who dreams dreams sent from God and will rescue his family from destruction by bringing them to Egypt, although this Joseph lacks a technicolor dream coat. And this Joseph will take Mary and Jesus into Egypt to hide Jesus from the violent and deadly cruelty of Herod and will lead them back out again after another dream from an angel gives him the all clear. Other scholars tell us Joseph taking Mary as his wife and naming Jesus is the way Jesus is legitimately connected to ancient King David and is evidence of Jesus being the fulfillment of God's promise to send a messiah we find in

the Old Testament. However, these probably incredibly accurate bits of information only to serve to turn Joseph into a plot device and conveniently ignores both the heartbreak and remarkable possibility in humanity that Joseph brings to the story of Christ's birth.

You see, despite being on the sidelines of the story, and at the same time essential to it, there is something I find deeply relatable in Joseph, something that draws me closer to him. Perhaps the attraction comes from sharing with Joseph the experience of being a parent and yet never being fully accepted as a "real" parent. How stepparents are often seen as making families uncomfortable for both the family members and the rest of society. Stepparents know too well what it is like to be relegated to the background of gatherings so the "real" family can feel a little less uncomfortable with our presence.

These words are not intended to make any parents feel bad or less. My intention this morning is to allow Joseph to step out of the background and into our midst so we might see and appreciate what his story can show us. Advent is the perfect time to shine a light on what might us uncomfortable about Joseph, what it is about him that makes us tend to keep him in the background, and what can happen when God chooses to act in our lives, when things may not go as we had envisioned or planned or assumed they would go. God has a way of shaking up our very rigid expectations and challenging us to consider that perhaps there is more to life than we can see.

Perhaps you have heard in other sermons or Bible studies what some of the words used in today's Gospel meant during Joseph and Mary's lifetime. For example, to be engaged meant that Joseph and Mary were in a committed relationship but unlike our modern interpretation of the word engaged, they were not living together, nor were they ready for such intimacy. In those days, where marriages were often arranged, there was a very serious process people followed, a process that often involved the entire community. The purpose of the process was to help prepare the individuals for the reality of married life, and to ease the transitions required for marriage. For example, in those days, the husband and wife didn't usually live in a sweet little house built for the two of them where they had privacy. Instead, the wife was assumed into the husband's family where the head of the house was most likely his mother and father. The process helped both families prepare and adjust to the changes of losing a daughter who helped her household and for the other household to make room for a new daughter-in-law who would be expected to help in different ways. The process also gave people comfort and security as they planned for the future. To my knowledge it was a process society and communities were happy with.

This might help us understand where we find Joseph in today's Gospel, having decided the woman he had been preparing to bring into his household had, he seems to believe, most likely betrayed him and that was not something he could live with. That means his marriage was over before it had begun, and that is a loss everyone experiences when a relationship ends. It is the same loss so very much like a death. Such losses hurt, and it is okay to acknowledge that hurt. It is perhaps interesting to note that despite his painful heartbreak, Joseph did not seek to punish Mary or shame her publicly. Some call that a kindness on his part; the author of the Gospel calls it righteous.

So, Joseph went to bed with heartbreak and disappointment and the heavy grief of loss instead of going to bed with the hope of soon sharing it with his soon to be wife. And isn't it stunningly beautiful that in the midst of those feelings God's Messenger- an angel- appeared to Joseph? God didn't leave Joseph just because of how he felt. We don't know if Mary explained what happened to Joseph before his dream or not. Maybe she did and he couldn't believe it. Maybe he heard second hand. We don't know. But what it is beautiful to me is that in what must have been his despair, God sent Joseph an angel, a messenger who spoke directly to what was going on in Joseph's heart, to the very emotion that brought out all the others: his fear. "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel said.

So often, when we hurt others and when we hurt ourselves, we do so out of fear. Fear of not knowing what will happen, fear of not having control, fear of not being respected, fear of not being able to live into what we are called to, fear of change. The angel's message cut to that fear, a fear that can also keep us from following God's will for us and showed Joseph and us we don't have to be afraid to live into family the way God dreams family can be.

Joseph shows us family isn't just something you are born into, it is something you are called into, and like love itself, family is a choice. One that we don't have to be afraid to make. Making the choice to wed Mary and be Jesus' parent meant Joseph was going to take on the judgment of society, perhaps some might judge him a hero and others a sucker, but his choice to obey God shows it doesn't matter what people say as much as what God calls us to.

We can see when God was making Jesus' family, God intentionally disrupted the process and system already in place. There is something there, I believe, to show us God's family is not about sharing DNA, it is about love and making room for each other. It is that choice to love even when it might not be the socially acceptable choice. Through Jesus' birth God gave us a family model that had discomfort and heartbreak as part of its story.

And that is where the Good News is. Because I don't believe there is a family that doesn't have its share of heartbreak or discomfort, that doesn't face disappointment or fear or loss at some time. The circumstances may not be the same for every family, but they don't have to be in order to be able to relate to the man who went to bed with fear and woke up with God's love in its place. This makes Joseph a model of repentance, as he changed from doing what he wanted to do what God wanted him to do.

For into such a family God's Son was born. Not the perfect family. Not the royal family. Not the prestigious family. The family God called together to grow together was much more like our families. Which means when our families, however they look, suffer or find ourselves deep in discomfort, we perhaps can take comfort in remembering Joseph, standing silently in the back shadow of the nativity, who is remarkable for his trust that no matter what has or will happen, God truly is with us. Perhaps Joseph might inspire us all to choose God's love even when we feel afraid, for that is how we welcome the Son of God into our families and into the world.