

## *What About Joseph?*

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Pastor Mary Koon

December 22, 2019, 8:15 am worship

Today, as we move ever closer to Christmas Eve, we will turn our attention to Matthew's account of Jesus' birth.

Each year, we read the story of Christmas several times, which is good! But we can run the risk of domesticating the scene, overlooking the wonder, the life-altering truth of God being born into our broken world as a vulnerable infant. Of opting for sentiment rather than becoming overwhelmed by the incarnation that literally changes our understanding of power and worth.

A couple of weeks ago, Anne highlighted Mary, the mother of Jesus' revolutionary and radical song of hope and defiance from the gospel of Luke. Today we'll focus on Joseph. His story – brief as it is – is found only in the gospel of Matthew.

Let us listen with new ears to discover how God may be speaking to us through these ancient words this morning:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 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.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, ‘God is with us.’ 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.

AMEN

I’ve been thinking a lot about Joseph these last couple of weeks. It started when we ran fresh out of 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls to play Joseph in the pageant last week. What would we do? For a moment...okay, it was brief, I considered doing without Joseph – dismissing him quietly, as it were.

But, of course, that wouldn’t work!

Without Joseph, we may not have had Christmas.

Poet Ann Weems considers Joseph – who often stands unobtrusively in our nativity scenes – back of the stable, taking a supportive role to the stars, Mary and Jesus. She gives him a little love in her poem, “Getting to the Front of the Stable.”

*GETTING TO THE FRONT OF THE STABLE*

*Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?  
Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,  
and told him to stand in the back of the crèche,  
background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?*

*God-chosen, this man, Joseph, was faithful  
in spite of the gossip in Nazareth,  
in spite of the danger from Herod.*

*This man, Joseph, listened to angels  
and it was he who named the Child  
Emmanuel.*

*Is this a man to be stuck for centuries  
in the back of a stable?*

*Actually, Joseph probably stood in the doorway  
guarding the mother and child  
or greeting shepherds and kings. . .*

*Actually, he probably picked the Child up in his arms  
and walked him in the night,  
patting him lovingly  
until he closed his eyes.*

*This Christmas, let us give thanks to God  
for this man of incredible faith  
into whose care God placed  
the Christ Child.*

*As a gesture of gratitude,  
let's put Joseph in the front of the stable  
where he can guard and greet  
and cast an occasional glance  
at this Child  
who brought us life.*

— Ann Weems from *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

Isn't that lovely?

The truth is that we don't know much about Joseph!

Legend holds that Joseph was older than Mary, maybe by 25 years, possibly a widower. Because he is not present in any of the scenes of Jesus' adult ministry, scholars think he died before Jesus' adult ministry. Clearly, he's present before and at the birth, and later was with Mary at Jesus' blessing and again when Jesus is lost in Jerusalem when he was 12. Had Joseph been there, say, at the wedding in Cana when Mary was pushing Jesus to do something as the wine ran out, we may have overheard Joseph whisper in Mary's ear, "Quit hovering, Mary, let the boy do things in his own time."

We read in Matthew's genealogy that Joseph was descended from the house of King David. Early listeners of Matthew's account would have known that the Messiah must come from the line of David.

We also believe that Joseph was, in Greek, “teckton,” a carpenter, but we discover this only when he is referred to as Jesus’ father later in the gospel, (chapter 13) as in, “Isn’t that the son of the carpenter of Nazareth?” We think that Jesus himself was a carpenter, and would have learned the trade from his father around age 12.

The gospel tells us that Joseph and Mary are engaged— their families had made arrangements for them to be married. They were not living together or being intimate with one another.

So when Mary becomes pregnant – well, it was scandalous.

The rule of the day was that Mary could have been stoned to death upon the disclosure of this news. Legally, Joseph had the right to enact this consequence. But Matthew tells us that Joseph, being a righteous man, was not willing to disgrace her by betraying this apparent indiscretion.

Joseph is called *dikaios* *Deeee- kai-ose*: just/righteous/upright Joseph knows God’s laws and he follows them. He is, to the best of his ability, in right relationship with God.

So Joseph decides to dismiss – get rid of- Mary quietly – to save her from public disgrace. A decent and just thing to do. With that decision, Joseph went above the requirements of the law. Gossip would spread quickly enough when her engagement was broken and pregnancy began to show.

This initial decision demonstrates a kind of righteousness that wasn’t required by the law, even though this decision would have still presented Mary with likely being shunned by her community, maybe even her family, and relegating her to a much harder life of caring for a child as an unwed mother.

But when he’s visited by an angel in a dream, everything changes. The angel tells Joseph that the baby that Mary is carrying is Emmanuel – God is with us. That he must not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, despite the consequences he surely would face. Surely, he must felt humiliation, pain, and anger. And, yet, Joseph listens and trusts.

So, let’s move Joseph from the back of the stable to right up front. I want to share a few thoughts about how Joseph’s story might inform our faith this season and into 2020.

First, Joseph changed his mind about Mary after his encounter with the divine. He was brave enough to go in a different path. In our political climate, changing one's mind is looked down upon, but heaven help us all if we ever stop learning and growing. What a gift that God's spirit seeks us in myriad ways and challenges us to greater compassion, wisdom, and imagination. Without our willingness to be open to these God nudges, our opinions and faith, become rigid and doctrinal. It is a vulnerable thing to have a change of heart, particularly if one has been entrenched with an idea/belief. I still remember the God encounter that allowed me to understand and become active for LGBTQ rights. God appeared in the form of a college friend who confronted my misunderstanding and fear of people who were gay.

Second, with the reassurance from the angel, Joseph goes above and beyond the law to do what was right. In doing so, he moves to a whole new level of righteousness. It couldn't have been easy.

Faithful and brave followers throughout generations have done the same, and over time, changed laws and culture, bringing about a better world. This time calls for nothing short of a revolution of love and justice, with our globe warming, nationalism on the rise, poor and black voters are disenfranchised, immigrants put in cages on our borders, families sleeping in mobile shelters because housing in Minneapolis is unaffordable. I am so moved to be part of a church community that understands that we not only need to feed, house and clothe people, but to continue to work to change laws that oppress people and hurt the earth.

Finally, the scripture tells us that Joseph names Mary's son Jesus, Emmanuel, God-is-with-us. Biblically, as it is today, names give weight and have meaning. Names matter. Joseph named the truth of Mary's child. As followers of God-is-with-us, we have an obligation to use our language to name truth in people and situations. To accept the call to name people and situations carefully because words have power. Change your words and you change your life.

In a Facebook post at the beginning of December, Presbyterian Pastor Lander Bethel wrote this

“As we draw near the Christmas story and look closely at the crèche where we find a poor and hungry family in a vulnerable place, and then raise our gaze to

vulnerable people around us, what are the circumstances we may see that call us to do more than what the law requires? What are the situations that beckon us to exercise a new level of righteousness for ourselves and for our nation? What message might come to us that would cause us to leap up from a dream to do such unexpected things that the very words “God is with us,” would tumble from our lips?”

Joseph’s example calls us to pay attention to the ways that God speaks to us – whether that is in a dream, through the voice of a teenager in Sweden or a passage of scripture that leads to an attitude or behavioral shift. Joseph reminds us to pay attention to what is going on in our lives and our world and name that truth. Joseph’s story calls us to seek to go beyond what is simply required to make sure that the vulnerable are cared for and the powerful are kept in check.

And as we do, we must not fear. For God is with us, and we walk this path together. So may the our lives, our work, and our relationships embody righteousness and grace this season and every season.