

Sermon for December 18, 2016
"Finding Joseph"

Matthew 1:18-25

When I was a kid one of the things we enjoyed doing at Christmas was setting up the nativity set. The figurines seemed to embody what Christmas was all about and the nativity set was a meaningful part of the Christmas decorating. Of course at the center was the baby Jesus dressed in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger just like the Bible said. There was Mary, dressed in ethereal blue, always kneeling at the manger. Then there were the shepherds usually with their sheep. And the wise men, wearing crowns and fine robes sometimes riding a camel, eternally bringing their gifts to the baby. There was also an angel who watched over all the people and animals.

But somewhere lost in all that was Joseph. Usually dressed in a plain brown or tan robe, sometimes mistaken for a shepherd. Often pushed aside to make way for the shepherds who had just seen angels, or for the wise men who had followed the star. One year we almost forgot to put Joseph out. We had positioned each of the figurines of the nativity set and were ready to put the box back in the attic when someone realized Joseph was still wrapped up in tissue paper in the bottom of the box.

It is true that Joseph is often overlooked in our retelling of the Christmas story. But he is not lost in the Bible. Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective. Joseph was a man of faith who submitted to God's will just as Mary was a woman of faith who did the same. So let's not lose Joseph this Christmas. Let's give him a place of prominence in our mental and spiritual nativity sets. Join me today in finding Joseph.

Who was Joseph? First we have to separate what the Bible tells us from what tradition has added to the story. For instance one church tradition says that Joseph was a middle aged widower. That he had been married before and had several children from that marriage. But the Bible says nothing about him having been married or a widower. For all we know he could have been a young man about the same age as Mary.

The first thing the Bible does tell us about Joseph is that he was engaged to Mary. She was promised to him. This engagement promise was as binding as a marriage vow. So when she was found to be with child, it must have been devastating. It seemed obvious to Joseph that Mary had been unfaithful to him and they had not even been formally married.

The second thing the Bible tells us about Joseph is that he was a righteous man. He believed in and truly worshipped God. His faith was in the Almighty. And that meant that he tried to follow God's laws. God's laws were clear that adulterers were to be stoned. And Mary had been seemingly caught committing adultery.

This is where the third thing the Bible tells us comes into play. It says, "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." Most people think that his unwillingness to expose her is because he was a righteous man. But the righteous uphold the law of God. If Mary had committed adultery; her offence was not just against Joseph. It was against God and the righteous were to make sure that the law was fulfilled. So a righteous man would turn her in to the authorities and make sure justice was done, which in this case would probably end in a stoning.

However Joseph chose to keep things quiet. I like the way the Good News Translation words it, "Joseph was a man who always did what was right, **but** he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly." Joseph put aside his own feelings of hurt to take care of matters in a way that would not end with Mary being disgraced and maybe executed. He was taking a great personal risk. People might think that he was the father. I mean people would think "If she had committed adultery would he have spared her and her child?" People would talk and say that Joseph had acted unrighteously to Mary and now look at the mess he got her into.

Yes, Joseph was a righteous man and he also acted mercifully to Mary. In a way he embodied the righteousness of God in a way that is refreshing. He was righteous but he was also merciful and gracious. He chose to spare Mary at great expense and risk to himself. After what had happened to Mary what decent family would betroth their daughter to Joseph? But that is the way God acts toward us. Even though we sin against God, the Almighty is merciful to us.

The fourth thing that the Bible tells us about Joseph is that he listened to God. It says that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him that the baby that Mary carried was from the Holy Spirit. Now you noticed I said that the important thing was that Joseph listened to God not that God spoke to Joseph. That's because God speaks to people all the time. God is speaking to us right now. The important thing here is that Joseph listened to what God said and believed it.

I don't know about you, but if it were me, I probably would not have believed. I mean an angel in a dream? If I had had that dream I wouldn't have believed it. I would have woken up and said, "Well that is the last time I eat quesadillas before going to bed."

But as unbelievable as it was, Joseph knew it was God who sent the angel in his dream. He believed that God was fulfilling prophecy. He believed that this was all about bringing Emanuel: "God with us." And Joseph willingly participated in this plan. He had free will. He could have said "God, count me out." But he didn't. He did as the angel said and took Mary as his wife and became the foster father of the Son of God.

I hope you have found Joseph today. I hope you have found him to be a righteous man. A man who followed God's laws. But also a man who followed God's example of mercy and grace. I hope you have found him to be a man who listened to God and followed God's directions. And I hope that Joseph has a more prominent place in your mental nativity set.

But most of all, I hope that you have discovered that Joseph was an integral part of God's plan to bring Emanuel, God with us, into the world. It is true that Mary is the one who gave birth to Emmanuel. But it was Joseph who nurtured and protected Emmanuel.

Like Joseph we should allow ourselves to be used as instruments of bringing God's presence into our world. We should seek to be righteous, merciful and gracious. Like Joseph we should listen to and heed God's word. And like Joseph we should nurture the presence of God with us. That way the world shall know Emmanuel - God is with us!