

Matthew 1:18-25

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 fulfill 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.

One of the most precious things within God's creation is a faithful man. Now ladies, this is not to discount your role in the world and in the church. That is unassailable. But you ladies know that it is true. A faithful, Christ-following man is a precious thing.

I say this because this is the Sunday that comes up once every three years where Joseph gets front-lined during Advent. The fourth Sunday of Advent, year A. It is the Sunday that we get a glimpse of someone in Scripture that is pretty much missing throughout the rest of the stories of Christmas.

I'm not sure why that is, but it is true. Think about the nativity scenes that you have seen over the years. The shepherds and the sheep. The stable with Mary right in the middle of the scene. Just below her is the baby Jesus in the manger. And there behind them, on the second or third tier of the scene, is Joseph.

Joseph always seems to be relegated to a bit part in the Christmas Story. Do you know that the Gospel of Mark doesn't even mention him? John doesn't do much better. In his Gospel there is only one reference to Joseph. It says, "Jesus, Son of Joseph." That's it. Although there are a few references to Joseph in Luke, they are more like background information. They seem to mention Joseph as just being present when other things were going on. Throughout the story, throughout the years of tradition, Joseph seems to get left behind. That is until the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A. Today is the time when we get to hear from Matthew, the Gospel writer to the Jews. Today we get to hear something about Joseph's experience and his story. So men, we need to listen up. There is a message that Joseph has for us.

There are three basic things about ourselves and our relationship with Christ that we can learn through Joseph. They are important things about our spiritual lives and how we are called to relate to Jesus. The three things are Trust, Courage, and Humility.

You know the story. We just heard it. Mary and Joseph are engaged. Early on, Mary becomes pregnant without Joseph's involvement. This was very serious. Jewish law is crystal clear and very harsh. There are basically two socially-acceptable options. The first would be to publicly expose the woman and then to stone her. The second would be to divorce her. Joseph chooses the latter. He decides, as quietly as possible, to divorce her, which was really quite generous of him. Everyone in town would have praised him as a self-sacrificing saint, even though Mary's life would have been ruined.

Now, in the cultural context, I'm sure God understood what Joseph had decided to do, but divorce was not part of the God's plan. So, he helped Joseph see passed the socially-acceptable choices. He sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to bring him a message. The angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. He told Joseph that the baby conceived in her was God idea.

Now, it is easy for us, on this side of the resurrection, to get caught up in those powerful words, but think about Joseph. Think of the circumstances. Think of the embarrassment, the awkwardness, the humiliation. Think of the talk around town. After all, Joseph had a business to think of. Most men would just shake off the dream and stick to the plan. But that is not what Joseph does. He chooses to listen to the still small voice and he chooses to trust. He chooses to trust that the dream was from God and not a bad bowl of fish.

Have you ever had that experience...the still small voice, not the fish? Have you ever trusted in a hunch, a pull, a tug on your life? Have you ever heard the still small voice that Jesus speaks about in a moment of insight or intuition? Have you ever engaged, at a higher level, a coincidence, which has been defined as God acting, but choosing to remain anonymous? How many times have *we* heard from God but chose to explain it away by seeking a simpler explanation, by embracing an easier answer?

Joseph chose to trust, and it wasn't that he was just a more superstitious person in a more superstitious world. Joseph chose to trust that God does indeed act in our lives and through his example he shows us the *Path to Christ*.

And Joseph was courageous. After Joseph chose to trust that God indeed was doing something, Joseph went to Mary. He didn't wait. He acted. He acted courageously. He took the initiative. He engaged the vision and went to Mary and shared with her what their future held.

Just imagine that for a minute. It couldn't have been easy to be engaged to a woman who was growing day by day with a child that is not yours. There is a scene in the movie, *The Nativity Story*, that shows Joseph and a very pregnant Mary leaving town for the census and, as they left the town, Joseph jokingly says to Mary that people would now have to find something else to talk about. That decision to trust fully had to be difficult and to act on that trust was tremendously courageous.

You know, I think that it is sometimes easy for us, as Christians, to say, in some vague way, that sure we trust, we believe, we have faith, but when it comes time to act on that trust, to act on that faith, and to take the risk of what might come from that action, so many are nowhere to be found. Joseph shows us that we must take our trust and make it more than a conversation for Sunday School or coffee hour. Trust shows us our way to Christ, courageous action shows us how to *Live for Christ*.

And finally, there is humility. Like all of us, Joseph wasn't perfect. His understanding of what was happening was incomplete. But, even so, he was willing to offer to God all that imperfection, all that doubt, and all his confusion. And when he did, when we do, God will take our imperfections, our flaws, our insecurities and He will transform them. He will redeem them. He will empower them. And then He will use them. Our job is simply to be willing to humbly make the offer.

Trust shows us our way to Christ, courageous action shows us how to live for Christ, and humility shows us how to *Live with Christ*. That's the message of Joseph and it's too bad that we get to hear it just once every three years.

Bob Moorehead, who pastored a church in Washington state, prays the following:

"God, give us men...ribbed with the steel of Your Holy Spirit...men who will not flinch when the battle is fiercest...men who won't acquiesce, or compromise, or fade when the enemy rages.

"God, give us men who can't be bought, bartered, or badgered by the enemy, men who will pay the price, make the sacrifice, stand the ground, and hold the torch high.

"God, give us men obsessed with the principles true to your word, men stripped of self-seeking and a yearning for security...men who will pay any price for freedom and go any lengths for truth.

"God, give us men delivered from mediocrity, men with vision high, pride low, faith wide, love deep, and patience long...men who will not surrender principles of truth in order to accommodate their peers.

"God, give us men more interested in scars than medals. More committed to conviction than convenience, men who will give their life for the eternal, instead of indulging their lives for a moment in time. Give us men who are fearless in the face of danger, calm in the midst of pressure, bold in the midst of opposition.

“God, give us men who will pray earnestly, work long, preach clearly, and wait patiently. Give us men whose walk is by faith, behavior is by principle, whose dreams are of heaven, and whose book is the Bible.

“God, give us men who are equal to the tasks of our day.”

Joseph was truly a man of God. May God flood his church and the world with such as him.

Amen