

Sermon Series: *Journey to Bethlehem Week 2 (Journey with Joseph)* 12.6.15

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary His mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you will call Him Jesus ["God saves"] because He will save His people from their sins. Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: "Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Emmanuel, which means God-with-us." When Joseph woke up, he did just as the angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. Matthew 1:18-24

This is the second week of Advent and we light the candle of peace. It seems tragic and ironic to light the candle of peace following another act of terrorism; this one in San Bernardino last Wednesday where fourteen people were shot dead. But this is Advent... a stubborn season of hope in the midst of pain, of growing light in midst of the lengthening days of darkness, and of peace in the midst of brokenness.

In November there was a huge outcry on Facebook that Starbucks' Coffee took the "Christmas" symbols (snowflakes and reindeer, I think) off their holiday red cups... as if Starbucks' was trying to deny Christmas. People were posting angry responses on Facebook... "Don't let Starbucks' take away Christmas!" and "'Like' if you're going to tell people 'Merry Christmas!'" I wondered how many people who posted go to church, and observe Christmas as the celebration of Jesus' birth. Because nothing can take Christmas away: Christ has come, and that's what Christmas is. Christians celebrate Christ's coming into the world no matter what holiday symbol is on a coffee cup or what holiday greeting people use.

But this is Advent... not yet Christmas. The difference between the two seasons is simply that Christmas looks back and celebrates something that has already happened, and while Advent looks back and celebrates... Advent also looks forward for what is still to come... for Christ's triumphant return. One of my favorite authors, Madeleine L'Engle, wrote at the beginning of her book, *The Glorious Impossible*, "To be a Christian is to believe the impossible." We Christians believe that God so impossibly loved the world that God, needing to be more than among us *became* one of us; and at a particular time and place on earth Jesus was born as a human baby; and that His life, death, and resurrection were all signs of God's unbelievable love for us. We also believe and hope and long for a second impossibility: that Christ will come again and heal and save the world. Today in worship we light the Advent candle of peace, with anticipation of the coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

This is (to use Madeleine L'Engle's word) the *impossible* season of Advent, when Christians are invited to suspend disbelief and simply... enter into the mystery. During Advent I'm preaching and hosting a Wednesday noontime "spiritual sandwich" on Adam Hamilton's book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*. [*hold up book*] Each week during Advent we journey with one of the characters involved in God's impossible plan. Last week we journeyed with Mary, Jesus' mother. I invited us all to spend five minutes a day with Mary and contemplate, as she did, the nearness of God.

This week... we journey with Joseph. I've discovered that in some Christian traditions Joseph is so unimportant that he's not always included in nativity sets. But I've really wanted to know Joseph, and I've studied his features and his posture in every crèche I see to discover who he was. So little is written in scripture about him. So little is known about him. His important cameo appearance is in this story from Matthew's gospel. Joseph, like Jesus' mother Mary, was visited by an angel, who explained (to them both) that in spite of how bad things looked God was at work... designing a glorious plan... that included both of them. Mary would carry the Christ-child and Joseph would... be there.

Last Monday I went to St. Mary's college, to the chapel, to find Joseph. Where better than a Catholic church to see statues of Jesus' family? The chapel is so beautiful that it brought me to tears. It was dim and silent inside and I walked up to the altar on "quiet cat feet" and looked at the life-size and life-like statues carved and set into niches. In the middle of the altar is Jesus hanging on the cross, and standing below, on either side of Him, His mother Mary, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. I recognized that scene from scripture, where Jesus said to His mother, "Woman, here is your son" and to the beloved disciple, "Here now is your mother." But I was surprised that Joseph wasn't with Mary and Jesus. To the right of these carvings I recognized John the Baptist, from the camelhair tunic he wears. And then to the left is another carved figure, of a man holding a lily. I was perplexed; I'd thought it would be easy to walk into this chapel and find Joseph, and I don't know a story from scripture about a man holding a lily.

I went next door to the Ministry and Mission Center, and the woman there told me that the man with the flower is Joseph. Legend is that a husband was (rather urgently) needed for Mary, so all eligible men were invited to lay their down their staffs on the steps of the temple... and in the morning there was a sign from God about who Mary's husband would be: a flower was growing out of Joseph's staff.

It seemed a rather impossible story to my Protestant ears... but isn't this Advent, the season that invites us to suspend disbelief and accept the mystery? Since then I've looked at every Joseph in every crèche, studying him to see what I can learn about him. Last night I walked down here and looked at our Joseph in the crèche on the porch. He's a lovely figure, head bowed and hands folded in prayer with his wife, over their new baby, Jesus.

Last Sunday we heard a word that describes who Mary was: she was a contemplative. Mary listened for, and heard, and pondered in her heart... the love and presence of God. She invites *us* to be contemplative; to watch and listen and wait with her for the coming of Christ. Who is Joseph, and what do we learn from him in the few sentences that are told about him? The word that seems to describe Joseph is generous. To be generous is to be "free from meanness or smallness of mind or character; a person who give to others something of value."

My children's bible tells the story of Joseph like this: [read out of book] "And so it was: Mary got pregnant and Joseph, her fiancé, found out. He, who knew Mary well and loved her, was very surprised. He did not think Mary would be capable of going with another man while she was engaged to him. He could not understand what was happening. After confirming the news, he realized he had no choice but to leave her. He felt very sad. What was he going to do now with the great love he felt for Mary, if she did not feel the same? He head was pounding and he lay down to rest awhile. While he was sleeping, and still concerned about Mary's pregnancy, he saw an angel in his dreams who told him, 'Joseph, do not be afraid to accept Mary in your house as your wife. She is pregnant by God's action. She is still a virgin. You will name the baby Jesus. He will save the people from their sins.' Suddenly Joseph's sleep was

calm and relaxed. He no longer felt anxious and could rest. When he woke, he ran to Mary's house to take her into his home."

Joseph was the definition of generous: free from meanness or smallness of mind or character. He gave Mary something of infinite value: his protection, his hand in marriage, and his belief in her role in God's plan.

Generous is a word, and an action, needed here today. Fear of the stranger, hatred of the enemy, intolerance of others who believe differently than we do... and worst of all, hoarding God's generous love for all humanity... this is a plague loosed in the world, in our neighborhoods, and in our selves. Joseph's trust in God - and again like Mary we can assume that Joseph was used to listening and watching for God - because his trust, and familiarity, with God helped him suspended disbelief in Mary's impossible pregnancy; he was able to ignore the cynicism and suspicion that was knocking on his door; he could generously accept his minor role in God's plan.

Joseph is left behind in scripture right after the young child Jesus was found teaching in the temple. But Joseph's generosity helped mold his son, Jesus, who would refer God as Abba, which is Arabic for papa. Jesus learned to love and trust in the generous love of His heavenly Abba, from his human Abba, Joseph. Jesus would grow up and teach His followers - and this includes us - to be generous. Jesus' teachings include, "Turn the other cheek;" "Walk the second mile;" "Pray for those who hate you;" and "Love your enemies."

I read the children's story version of Matthew's gospel because of the human emotion it puts into the reading. We learn that Joseph was surprised and sad... that he loved Mary... the news that she was pregnant made his head pound. And that when Joseph woke from his dream, his encounter with the angel, he decided to be generous. He decided to love Mary, to marry her, to raise her child, to accept his role in whatever God planned. Joseph decided to love anyway.

This would be his message for us, who journey to Bethlehem... in anticipation of finding the Baby in a manger... "Love anyway." Joseph invites us to travel to Bethlehem with him. And if we decide to travel in the company of Jesus' father, Joseph, we must do as he modeled for us. Suspend disbelief. Reject cynicism and suspicion. Counter the growing doubt and darkness with the light of God. And love anyway.

This morning we come to this Table, to this holy meal, to meet the Risen Christ, the one who learned from His earthly Abba to "love anyway" and who trusted His heavenly Abba to lead Him from the manger to the grave to glorious resurrection. Jesus gathered with His friends, knowing that He would be betrayed and abandoned, and He chose to love anyway. He broke bread and poured out a cup to symbolize His love for us.

Jesus' example of generous love - body broken, blood spilled out, forgiveness in the face of betrayal, abandonment, and death on a cross - was modeled for him by His human papa, Joseph: Love anyway.