

## 5 THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT JOSEPH

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Isaiah 7:10-16  
Matthew 1:18-25



I had planned to entitle this sermon, *4 Things We Know About Joseph*, but then last week during the after church conversation at Westside, I was reminded of a fifth thing, which I will mention first—Joseph has a reputation for selling real estate. Tradition holds that, if one buries a statuette of St. Joseph upside-down in the front yard of a property for sale, it will sell quickly.

Olivia buried Joseph in her front yard—a gift from her devoutly Catholic friend. Olivia called me several days later. Wouldn't 'ya know, someone had stolen the statue right out of her yard! She suspected a four-legged thief named Fido who belonged to the neighbor. I'm not sure what kind of message we're to glean from that circumstance, but the house did sell. So one thing we know about St. Joseph is that many associate him with residential real estate sales. In fact, when Googling St. Joseph, the first website to come up was one advertising the "St. Joseph Home Sale Kit, with statue, protective burial bag, prayers and a history, all for only \$9.95!"

Unless one is selling a home, however, most don't give much thought to the father figure in Jesus' family.

*Gentle Mary laid her child  
Lowly in a manger  
There He lay, the undefiled,  
To the world a stranger.  
Such a babe in such a place,  
Can He be the Savior?  
Ask the saved of all the race  
Who have found His favor.*

*Angels sang around His birth,  
Wise men sought and found Him.  
Heaven's star shone brightly forth,  
Glory all around Him.*

*Shepherds saw the wondrous sight,  
Heard the angels singing;  
All the plains were lit that night,  
All the hills were ringing.*

This lovely Christmas song, written in 1919 by Joseph Simon Cook, paints a beautiful picture of the first Christmas. Everybody is there in the song—Mary, the baby Jesus, angels, wise men, shepherds, the star—everybody is there, except Joseph.

Joseph seems to be a common oversight in Christmas carols. In fact, if we were to judge by Christmas carols alone, we would have to conclude that Joseph's role in the Christmas story was unimportant. Such a conclusion, however, would be wrong, for Joseph plays a crucial role in the birth of our Savior, on many levels.

First, Joseph gives Jesus the genealogical credentials he needs to back up the Messianic claim. The prophets spoke of God's promised Messiah—a Savior who would come from the household and lineage of David. The entire first chapter of Matthew lists the genealogy of Jesus through Joseph, to show that he was indeed a descendant of David and therefore a legitimate candidate for Messiah, at least by virtue of his family tree.

Second, according to Matthew's Gospel, Joseph gives Jesus legal legitimacy as well.

Bible commentator William Barclay writes that there were three stages to the Jewish marriage process at the time Jesus was born. First was the engagement. Couples could become engaged while still children, by arrangement of their parents or a professional matchmaker. Engagements were not always arranged in this way, but they could be. If so, then an engagement could go on for years, until the couple was marrying age.

After the engagement and before the consummation of the marriage, there was a one-year period called the betrothal. The betrothal was a ratification of the engagement and could only be broken by divorce. If the man or woman wanted to pull out of the engagement, it was best to do so before the betrothal year began.

During this year the couple was known as man and wife, but did not have the full rights they had after the marriage proper, which was the third and final phase of the marriage process.

News of Mary's condition became known to each of them during their betrothal year. The Law dictated that Joseph must divorce Mary because, since the two of them hadn't been involved in any activity that would lead to procreation, Mary must have been up to no good with some other fella, which was definitely against the rules.

At this point in the story, we learn two more very important things about Joseph.

- 1) He was a righteous, or just man, meaning he would obey the Law, no matter how much he cared for Mary. He had to put obedience before his own happiness, to show that he loved God more than anything or anyone else, even his betrothed.
- 2) He was a merciful man. Even though he knew he must divorce Mary, his plan was to do so quietly so as not to expose her to public disgrace. He put his concern for Mary and her feelings above his own. He must have been hurt by what he thought was true, yet rather than lash out in anger or retaliation, he planned to do the very best he could by Mary, such as not embarrassing her by making a lot of noise about the unfortunate situation in which they found themselves.

But just when he'd made up his mind, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him everything was not as it seemed. The angel 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.*"

Here we learn two more things about Joseph.

- 1) He was a man of great faith, and
- 2) He was a man of great courage.

Joseph had the faith to follow God's instructions and he had the courage to stand up to the snickers, gossip, ridicule and moral indignation of his neighbors, friends and relatives. There were certainly those who whispered behind his back, or perhaps even accused him to his face of not being an obedient, Law-abiding Jew because he did NOT dispose of Mary according to the Law. Yet Joseph endured these insults and did as the Lord commanded: He took Mary as his wife and after she had born a son, Joseph declared his name to be Jesus. According to Jewish tradition, the father is the one who names a child. By naming Jesus, Joseph is declaring himself to be the baby's father, thereby adopting him as his own son.

Luke's Gospel, like the Christmas carols, focuses on Mary in the birth narrative. Mary's role is primarily passive. When God's angel tells her she is to bear a son, she responds, "*...let it be to me according to your word.*"

Matthew's Gospel, on the other hand, focuses on Joseph and his active response to God's action. Three times an angel appears to Joseph in a dream

- Before Jesus was born
- After the wise men came to visit and Herod was searching for Jesus to kill him
- After Herod's death

Three times Joseph must do something in response to the message he received

- Wed Mary and name the baby Jesus
- Flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath
- Return to Israel once Herod died

Joseph's active response to God's action is consistent with Matthew's understanding of true religion—and with John Calvin's, John Knox's and modern Presbyterians' as well. For although we believe unreservedly that God is the supreme actor in the drama of salvation—that salvation comes as a free gift from God through the saving work of Jesus Christ and through no effort of our own—human

response to God's saving grace must be active and not merely passive.

If you truly believe that God loves you enough to send His Son to die to save you from your sin, then you can't possibly just say, "Oh, how nice," and live your life as if that weren't true! As the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" says,

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Joseph responds to God's action with obedience to God and kindness toward Mary and her son. Obedience to God and kindness toward others sounds like a pretty good formula for faithful living, even today.

Tony Campolo tells the story about the late Mike Yaconelli, who told the story about a deacon in his church who wasn't deaking. He just didn't do what he was supposed to do as a deacon.

One day he said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people who go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home and at least do that?" The deacon agreed.

The first Sunday the deacon was at the old folks home, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon. The next month, the next month, and the next month.

Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body that's all right." The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging

out all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks.

He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

Christmas works when we let Jesus take us into unfamiliar territory — a nursing home, a neighbor's home, or into something even more bizarre, like an attitude adjustment, a generous spirit, a helping hand. Whatever. The point is that whenever and wherever we go, we are the hand of Jesus to others, and when that happens — Christmas happens.

In traditional crèches, Joseph is shown holding up a lantern, so that all can see the Christ child. As we approach the manger this year, may we let the light of Christ shine through us in obedience to God and kindness shown to others no matter what their circumstance. And may the peace of Christ be with you this Season of Anticipation and always.