

Joseph: Father of Faith and Courage
Isaiah 7:14-17; Matthew 1:18-25
December 13, 2020
Advent 3

It probably wouldn't be much fun to play Joseph in the church pageant. Joseph appears at first to be an insignificant character in most nativity scenes you might see. He emerges from the shadow of Mary and the baby Jesus. All the attention is on Mary while Joseph hangs around with the shepherds and animals off to the side somewhere. Joseph has no lines to speak, he just stands there.

We never hear Joseph speak in the gospel. Sometimes he is referred to as the greatest man who never spoke a word in the gospel. We don't know a lot about Joseph other than he was a carpenter from the small town of Nazareth. There was nothing striking about him. His simple, well-worn clothes revealed him to be a man of modest means.

He was a person of few words, much more apt to show up at your door with his tool chest to fix that stool, table, or door latch. This man was a doer, not a talker – the strong, silent type. What we do know about Joseph is that he was a good man, a solid citizen any community large or small would be proud to call its own.

In terms of Mary – his fiancée, the custom of the day was for families to arrange the marriages of their children. Often this involved negotiations with the parents, while the children had no say in whom they would marry. Joseph's family and Mary's family had arranged for the two of them to be married.

Being a small town, they no doubt had known each other for some time. With the blessing of their families, they were formally engaged. There was a legal bond between them even though they did not live together. If for some reason either one wanted to break off the engagement, a legal divorce was required.

Traditionally the couple would be engaged for one year, and then they would be married. The whole town would celebrate the marriage of two of its own. The wedding celebration and feast could last anywhere from a few days to a week.

Mary and Joseph were excited about getting married. Joseph longed for the day when he could take Mary home as his wife. We can imagine Joseph inventing carpentry errands that took him by Mary's house. We can picture Mary making a wide detour with her water jar on the way to the well and walking ever so slowly past Joseph's shop, hoping to catch a glimpse of her beloved. Joseph must have been the happiest man in all of Nazareth. Mary would soon become his wife.

Then one day everything changed. Mary wanted to speak with Joseph. She told him about an angel visiting her who told her that she would have a child who will "be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High." (Luke 1:32) Matthew tells us that Joseph was a "righteous man," but he was having a hard time believing Mary's story.

The news that Mary was with child hit Joseph like a ton of bricks. You can imagine how quiet Joseph grew, dark with hurt and anger . . . perhaps he turned away from her, clenched his fists, and pounded his work bench. We can imagine Mary dissolved into tears, running from his shop.

As she left, she blurted out that she had hoped that at least he would understand. And then she was gone. Joseph was left alone to agonize over how he should handle this problem. As he saw it he had two choices: he could set the date of the wedding sooner and hope his family and neighbors had lost track of the months, or he could divorce her.

Mary was in danger. If anyone found out that she was pregnant, she would be stoned to death. Joseph really loved Mary and didn't want to see any harm done to her, but he wasn't sure – after what he had learned – that he could marry her. All day long in his carpenter shop he wrestled with his dilemma. He spent many sleepless nights tossing and turning, pondering Mary's strange news, thinking how to best solve his problem.

Finally, he made his decision. Joseph decided that there was only one thing to do. He would quietly divorce her, and pray that no harm would come to her. Then he would get on with rebuilding his life.

An exhausted Joseph fell asleep. That's when God in heaven turned to an angel to speak to him: "Gabriel," God said. "Go down to earth right now, and tell Joseph the truth before he makes a tragic mistake."

So a light grew bright in Joseph's sleep. It was through a dream that the angel spoke to Joseph. The more Joseph heard and saw, the happier he became. "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife," the angel said. "The baby conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Mary didn't sin. Mary didn't lie. She is an honorable woman. Mary is going to have a baby boy, and you shall call him Jesus."

Even in his sleep, Joseph was smiling as broad as a barn. When he awoke, he was positively grinning. "Why do you smile all the time?" the people in Nazareth asked. "Oh," Joseph said, "I'm getting married."

There was a radiant joy in Joseph and Mary that the people who lived in darkness just could not comprehend. He just looked at his Mary and smiled. You can be sure that God looked down from heaven, and smiled, too.

You know the rest of the story. It came to pass how Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem as a result of Caesar's decree, and while on the way, it came time for Mary to deliver. There was no room for Mary to stay in Bethlehem that night, so she gave birth to the baby Jesus, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and layed him in a manger.

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I have always been intrigued by Joseph – husband . . . father . . . Godly man . . . strong and silent, always near to lend a hand if mother or baby should need him. I don't know what Joseph thought about all the happenings around Bethlehem at that time. Joseph never had much to say. Mothers have a natural bond with their baby. They have shared an experience that a man can never have—and that is the wonder and joy of giving birth.

I know, there are many women out there who are probably thinking, “Well, if you want it, buddy, you can have it!” But I remember wondering, especially with out first born, how I as a father could ever make up the gap of bonding with my son that his mother knew from conception, and nurtured for nine months before Jackson was ever born.

A wise father once said, “A man's role begins at a baby's birth.” That's when the hard work of being a father begins. As for Joseph, we can be sure he worked hard in the carpenter shop and taught Jesus the trade as the boy grew, and later on, there would be the flight to Egypt that Joseph carefully orchestrated in order to keep mother and child out of harm's way.

What Joseph lacked in words, he more than made up for with his actions and protection for his family. His heart must have been filled with wonder, and more than a little fear. Joseph had his own role to play in the divine drama. He undoubtedly wanted his son to have a better life . . . an easier life than he had.

Soon enough, Joseph would learn all-to-well about the cross on the horizon and the redeeming sacrificial love of his own son. But for now, Joseph loved and supported his wife Mary as she prepared to give birth. Joseph was a father of strong faith and courage.

Someone once said, The strength of a man isn't seen in the width of his shoulders - it is seen in the width of his arms as he holds those that he loves. The strength of a man isn't seen in the weight he can lift - it is in the burdens he carries and

overcomes. The value of a man is not what is in his bank account - it is what is in his heart.

Joseph was that kind of man. Joseph was a father of faith and moral courage. Joseph trusted his wife Mary when she came to him with the startling news about what God was about to do through her. It took a lot of trust and courage for Joseph to let things unfold according to God's plan, when it would have been so easy to walk away based on what he could only see on the surface. But Joseph was able to trust . . . he trusted God . . . he trusted Mary . . . and allowed God's plan to happen.

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Particularly for fathers, but for parents everywhere, as we near Christmas day, I hope you will love your sons and daughters and grandchildren the way Joseph loved his son. Offer your unconditional support and care. Look beneath the surface. Things are seldom the way they appear. Give your son, your daughter, or your spouse the benefit of the doubt, just like Joseph did. They don't need more stuff for Christmas. Give them your time, your energy, your wisdom and your love. Help them to realize God's dreams for their lives, just like Joseph did for Mary and the baby Jesus.

And finally, for you fathers – love and support your child's mother. A wise person once said, "The greatest gift a father can ever give his child is to love their mother unconditionally." Joseph certainly did that, and more. Maybe Joseph was in the background at the manger that night when his son was born –but he stood by Mary the whole time, and welcomed the baby Jesus into the world.

Maybe that's the message for us as we near Christmas. The message is *not* to try to do one more thing – but to simply accept the gift God has prepared for us. The time is almost at hand. So "Come, let us adore him . . . O come, let us adore him," as we stand beside Joseph and welcome Jesus into a world and into our hearts, after which we will never be the same. Amen.

Isaiah 7:14-17

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15 He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. 16 But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. 17 The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah--he will bring the king of Assyria."

Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.