

“Joseph: Jesus’ Dad”

Date: June 18, 2017

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 2:41-52; Matthew 1:18-24

Occasion: Father’s Day

Themes: Father’s Day; Joseph

For Father’s Day I thought we’d take a look at one of the Dads in the Bible – Joseph of Nazareth, Jesus’ Dad. This is the first sermon in a series I’ll be preaching this summer, looking at prominent people in the Bible, both men and women.

In the coming weeks’ we’ll take a look at the lives and testimony of Sarah, wife of Abraham; Noah, famous ship-builder and animal rescuer; Esther, a queen for such a time as this; Jacob, the scoundrel; Moses, who went toe-to-toe with the king of Egypt; a nameless woman from Cana; the famous King David, shepherd boy who slays giants; Mary, NOT the mother of our Lord; and finally we’ll encounter Paul, who helped to jump-start the church.

But today, we want to come back to Joseph, the step-father of Jesus. What do we know about him and does he have anything to say to us on Father’s Day, 2017?

Joseph and Mary had announced their engagement. Back then they were as good as married. It would have taken a divorce decree to call it off now. But then, Mary tells Joseph she’s pregnant; and he knows it’s not his child. What’s a good man to do?

Joseph thought about a quiet divorce, but before he could get to the courthouse, an angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him: “It’s alright. Go ahead and marry her. Your soon-to-be-wife is going to give birth to the Savior of the world.”

What do you suppose God saw in Joseph, beyond the sawdust

and the nail apron, that made him say, “There, *that’s* the man I will entrust to raise my Son on earth?” I’ve got some ideas, do you? What do you think God saw in Joseph that caused the Almighty to choose *him* as Jesus’ Father on earth?

Joseph’s calling was extraordinary and unique. No man before or since has been asked to raise the Messiah – God Himself – as his own son. Yet Joseph’s calling was also fairly typical, in that God didn’t require him to radically alter his personality, or suddenly acquire a new skill set.

Unbeknownst to Joseph, God had equipped him for the task that awaited him. Now, God would call on Joseph to draw from what he had been given and see his plan through to completion. Which one of us, as fathers, ever feels adequate and totally prepared for the task of raising children? And yet, God gives us what we need.

That’s what God’s call on our life involves – using the gifts God has given us for a specific purpose. So, whether we are called to be a father or mother, a student or a teacher, a missionary or laborer, God gives us what we need, to fulfill God’s call on our lives.

Joseph is an inspiring example of a regular person, who found himself in extraordinary circumstances. God will do that for each one of us, if we let Him. God gives us the opportunity to be a part of something much bigger than ourselves. And God gives us the talents and abilities to use in ways that will make a difference in the world.

Joseph’s world gets rocked, doesn’t it? God can do that to a guy, when he becomes a Dad. Our world is turned upside down. Things aren’t the same anymore. Ask any Dad of a newborn child. Life is different. Joseph’s life was really rocked, though.

His reputation was called into question. Mary is pregnant and the baby isn't his. What was he to do? One of the hallmarks of Joseph's life was that he was a righteous man. He did what was right. He listened for God's voice and he obeyed.

The Gospel of Matthew makes clear that Mary's pregnancy was a scandal. Sure, she was with child by the Holy Spirit. But either Joseph didn't know it, or he didn't believe Mary's story, at first. The couple's engagement was falling apart. Mary faced the strong likelihood of becoming an unwed mother. In first-century Galilee, such a broken home could have dire – even deadly – consequences.

Joseph considers doing the right thing, quietly divorcing her, not putting her through public humiliation, and possibly even being stoned to death, which the Law allowed for the sin of adultery. But even with a quiet divorce, she still would have been shamed and seen as damaged goods from then on, making it nearly impossible for her to marry in that community ever again.

Now, here is where Joseph's sterling character shines through. Joseph was open to heeding fresh advice from God. In a dream, an angel tells Joseph that his fiancé is carrying a child conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he would fulfill the ancient promise spoken of by the prophet Isaiah.

Sounds kind of crazy to me. But Joseph listened to the Lord. And he quietly obeyed God. Joseph might have assumed he knew where God's plan would take him, but he would soon discover he didn't have a clue.

How could he have envisioned sitting in a stable in Bethlehem, watching the birth of the Son of God, with barnyard animals looking

on? How could he have predicted Herod's order to slaughter the babies of Bethlehem, and of his own family's desperate flight to Egypt? He couldn't have. None of us can predict where God will take us, when we say "Yes," to the Lord.

But Joseph did say yes, and it wasn't just a one-time commitment. He said to God, in effect, "My life is yours. Do with it as you will." And God did.

That's what made Joseph a great Dad. He was open to hearing God's voice, and quietly doing what was asked of him. When I think of the great men I have known in my life, there is one thing they all have in common: quiet obedience to God. Not calling a lot of attention to themselves, just doing the next thing God asks them to do.

God chose Joseph for the sacred role of being Jesus' Dad. And that is what parenthood is, a sacred calling from God to raise children who will learn to love and serve and honor and obey the Lord.

In the first lesson we read, Luke tells us that "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." (2:52) That statement is about the sum total of all we know about Jesus, from the time his parents found him in the Temple to the time he started his public ministry at age 30.

That sentence summarizes more than two decades of Jesus' life. Think about these "missing years." What role might Joseph have played in helping Jesus to grow in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God, and in favor with men?

I'm imagining that Joseph had a great deal of influence on Jesus' life. Sure, Jesus was the Son of God. But His earthly father helped him to learn and to grow into the man he became.

When Jesus taught us to pray, he told us to call God "Papa." The Greek word is *Abba*. Abba, Father. Jesus was not giving us information about the biological identity of the Divine Presence in the Universe. Jesus was telling us how we can relate to the Almighty.

Instead of God being distant and remote and far away, God is like a loving father. Jesus would teach: If a child asks for bread, a loving father will not give him or her a stone. And if a child asks for a fish, a loving father will not give that child a snake instead. Our Heavenly Father knows what we need and is inclined to give us those things which are for our good. Joseph was a good provider.

When Jesus wanted to teach about the love and mercy of God, he told a parable about two brothers and their father. How the one son was a prodigal and made some bad choices, and the other son was begrudgingly obedient. The Father loved them both, forgave the wayward son, and wanted his eldest to soften his heart.

Where did Jesus get such wisdom? I believe it came, in part from his experience with his Dad. Parenthood is a sacred calling. Joseph heard the call and said "yes, Lord. Here I am. Use me."

God still looks for Josephs today – men and women who believe that God is not through with this world, common people who serve an uncommon God. Will you be that kind of person? Will you serve, even when you don't understand? Will you choose to "trust in the Lord with all your heart and not lean on your own understanding?"

(Proverbs 3:5) May God bless all of our fathers and give each of us a portion of the spirit of Joseph, Father of our Lord. Amen.

Some material borrowed from *Ten Men of the Bible*, by Max Lucado, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015; pp.117 – 141.