

“Joseph: Faithful to God”

Date: December 22, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

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

Occasion: Advent 4, Year A

Themes: Joseph, faithfulness,

For two Sundays the question of who Jesus is has been answered by John the Baptist. Jesus is “the one to come,” and “he who is mightier than I.” Today, Matthew answers that question this way: “Jesus is the child of the virgin Mary, wife of Joseph.” Jesus is the son of Mary and Joseph.

This morning I want to focus on Joseph. When Sunday school classes put on Christmas pageants, little boys clamor to play one of the magi; rarely do they rush to portray Joseph. In a typical Nativity set, Joseph is easily mistaken for a shepherd. No question about it, Joseph tends to be in the background of the Christmas story.

But today, in churches around the globe, Joseph is getting his time in the sun because of this lectionary reading for the fourth Sunday of Advent. This is Joseph’s big scene, and the example he sets still offers lessons for Jesus’ disciples today.

Like others in our salvation story, God turned Joseph’s life upside down. But Joseph always had a choice - to follow or not. Joseph took a risk for God, and that’s an example we can all follow.

The beginning of Jesus’ life was anything but Christmas-card perfect. The Gospel of Matthew makes clear that Mary’s pregnancy was a scandal. Sure, she was *with child by the Holy Spirit*, but Joseph either did not know it, or didn’t believe her story.

So, the couple’s engagement was falling apart, and the Virgin Mary faced the strong possibility of becoming an unwed mother. In first century Galilee, such a broken home could have dire consequences. At the very

least she would have been shunned and probably not asked for her hand in marriage again. Raising a child as a single parent would have been difficult, just as it is today.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a “righteous man.” That means he was obedient to Torah, the Law of Moses. At this point in history, betrothal is the first act of marriage. For all intents and purposes, they were married. So it really was a matter of divorcing Mary, and there had to have been sufficient cause, in this case, assumed adultery.

But Joseph was a righteous man; he wanted to do the right thing. Whatever sense of betrayal he may have felt, he wanted to part ways with Mary “quietly.” The alternative would have been to press charges against her before the local religious leaders, publically humiliating her. If he had done so, she would have been shamed and seen as damaged goods after that, and it probably would have been impossible for her to marry in that locale another time.

Nevertheless, Joseph was open to heeding fresh guidance from God. In a dream, an angel tells Joseph that the child his betrothed is carrying was indeed conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he will be the Immanuel promised in Isaiah.

That openness to God is one of his key attributes, one worth following. He is open to doing what the heavenly vision suggests, even though it may cost him his reputation as a righteous man. This says something about his courage and faith in God.

Joseph is open to listening for the voice of God, however that voice comes to him. Like Joseph from the Old Testament, he too is a dreamer of dreams in which God communicates with him. And the father of Jesus is willing to listen when God speaks.

In a second dream, Joseph is warned to take his family to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod. Like many refugees, then and today, Joseph acts to protect his family. In a third dream, Joseph is told it is safe to return from Egypt and finally in a fourth dream he is told to settle in Nazareth, and thus avoid Herod's successor, Archelaus, just as mean and nasty as his father.

In short, Joseph acted as a very loving father to his young and vulnerable son. And make no mistake; Joseph was more than Christianity's first "stepdad." By taking Mary as his wife and naming the child Jesus, the name given to him in the dream, Joseph was claiming the divinely born child as his own. In other words, Joseph adopted Jesus.

That's one reason Jesus – through Joseph – could trace his genealogy through King David's line. Jesus was Joseph's adopted son. In a sense, through Jesus coming to earth, taking on our flesh, going through the process of birth, death and resurrection, we're all adopted siblings of Christ. Jesus is our brother.

In Ephesians 1:5 it says, "In love God has predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ." Joseph proved to be one of the first biblical testimonies to the power of adoption into the family of Christ. Amen?

Joseph played an important role in the story of salvation. God chose him and Mary to be the parents of our Lord. They were hand-picked by God for this awesome responsibility of parenting Jesus. And they both accepted the challenge. They both heard the call, and they both said "yes" to God.

For Joseph, it's a big leap, but like other saints who follow him, Joseph believes, and he is faithful to God.

Joseph never had any monuments built in his name. We don't have a single word recorded that he ever spoke, not a word. His story reminds us that the Christian life is not about affirmation, wealth or power, but about humbly serving God and others.

Joseph is the patron saint of those who give themselves to God, who live a costly faith and never receive, nor expect any credit. No one ever prays, "Hail, Joseph, full of grace. The Lord is with thee." Joseph doesn't have a book named after him in the New Testament.

He has no honorific title. He is only mentioned a few times in the Bible. But perhaps this is the lesson we are to learn from Joseph. He was a simple, humble man who did what God asked him to do. Joseph models for us how to serve without expectation of reward.

He had the most important job ever given to a man up to that point. His was the task of raising Jesus and teaching him how to be a man. He did this without recognition, without the praise of others, solely because God called him in a dream to care for God's son.

Joseph said, "Yes," and he was faithful to God. How is God speaking to you this Advent? What is God asking of you? What is God calling you to do? Who is God asking you to be?

May we also be found faithful, listening for and then following the voice of God. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from an article written by Heather Hahn, multimedia news reporter for United Methodist News Service. 2013. newsdesk@umcom.org.

Prayer after the sermon:

O God, only you can order the unruly thoughts and desires of sinful souls. Grant us to so love your will that we desire to do no other; and grant us the pleasures of your gifts and graces that we desire no other pleasure. God, our pure hearts, cleansed by your Holy Spirit, desire to do no other than your will. Purify our thoughts and intentions that we may will to do only one thing: to love you with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and thus do only your will. This we ask through the strength of Jesus' name. Amen.