

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**December 8, 2024, The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Matthew 1:18-25

### **Advent with the Waiting Ones—Joseph the Father of Jesus**

This week I went looking for a poem or verse about Joseph for the cover of our bulletin. It turns out none of my books had much of anything about Joseph.

So, I wandered into the land of Google, and found a few poorly written rhyme poems by well-meaning people.

I did find the song lyrics from an album I listened to over and over again in Seminary, with the beautiful song by Michael Card which I put on the front of the bulletin, "Joseph's Song." I encourage you to YouTube it, and listen to it later.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KT4VDAlaMwU>

I also found a true story told by the Rev. John Buchanan, the former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago. It seems that four-year-old Megan was drawing a picture of the Manger Scene with her aunt. She put in every detail: Mary and her baby, cows, lambs, wise men and camels, shepherds and sheep, and a few cats and dogs for good measure.

Finally, her aunt asked her: "Where is Joseph, Megan?"

And Megan, "in exasperation and defiance," answered:

"Who needs Joseph, anyway?"

<https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2011/120411.html>

This morning, I am inviting us to think about why we need Joseph "anyway" in the manger, and in our own faith journeys in Advent as we journey with the waiting ones.

We need Joseph, so that we can learn from this faithful man who shaped the life of Jesus as he was growing up.

We may not know too much about him, but we know a lot about the son he helped raise with Mary, and with God.

Looking to Jesus, we know Joseph was a man of tender love, deep faith and a father who taught his son to love by loving him as he grew up.

Joseph comes to us in our waiting and preparing for Christmas morning and tells the story of what happens when God has a plan for your life and it disrupts your plans and changes everything.

Joseph invites us to wait in Advent knowing that in the big disruptions, our God is with us.

As I thought about Joseph this week, I was reminded of a strange reading that was given at a wedding I did a ten years ago. The bride's sister got up and read to us about oatmeal of all things, from an essay about love written by Robert Johnson.

Johnson writes: "Many years ago, a wise friend gave me a name for human love. She called it 'stirring-the-oatmeal' love. She was right: Within this phrase, if we will humble ourselves enough to look, is the very essence of what human love is, and it shows us the principal differences between human love and romance.

Stirring the oatmeal is a humble act—not exciting or thrilling. But it symbolizes a relatedness that brings love down to earth. It represents a willingness to share ordinary human life, to find meaning in the simple, unromantic tasks: earning a living, living within a budget, putting out the

garbage, feeding the baby in the middle of the night. To 'stir the oatmeal' means to find the relatedness, the value, even the beauty, in simple and ordinary things, not to eternally demand a cosmic drama, an entertainment, or an extraordinary intensity to everything... ~~Like the rice hulling of the Zen Monks, the spinning wheel of Gandhi, the tent making of Saint Paul,~~ it represents the discovery of the sacred in *the midst of the humble and ordinary.*"

<https://www.uua.org/families/ga/serving-all-families>

I think we need Joseph because he seems to me to be a "stirring the oatmeal" kind of person, who shows us "the sacred in the midst of the humble and ordinary." He clearly didn't choose the path his life took, but he listened to God's message through the angel, and changed the direction his life took. He loved his wife Mary and loved and helped raise Jesus,

Joseph gave them the "stirring the oatmeal" human love that helped shaped the life of his son, the Son of God, Jesus.

While there isn't much of his story told in the Bible, I think we can safely assume Joseph was "stirring the oatmeal"

as he loved and nurtured and protected his young son Jesus,  
becoming a refugee in Egypt about the time Jesus was two, before returning to  
Nazareth,

He loved Jesus:

as he worked as a carpenter,  
as he walked with Jesus to the synagogue, and the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was 12,  
as he talked to him about the life of faith,  
as he taught Jesus how to be a carpenter,  
and as Jesus watched his earthly father love his mother, Mary.

Several years ago, the Adult Sunday School class studied the book "*The Journey, Walking the Road to Bethlehem,*" by the Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton.

Hamilton writes that the word used to describe Joseph's work in the Bible is the Greek word "tekton." A tekton was a woodworker or craftsman. You can hear this Greek word in our word architect. Hamilton says: "An arch-tekton was a master builder, just as an arch-angel was a lead angel. Yet Joseph was not an arch-tekton, only a tekton—not a master builder, but simply a humble woodworker."

In the Israel of those days, not many homes were built of wood. They were built of stone. So, a carpenter like Joseph would have mostly been building doors and roofs. He may have also built and repaired farm tools.

Nazareth, the town Joseph and his family finally settled in was a tiny village of 100 to 400 people in those days. There wouldn't have been much work for Joseph there. But just an hour's walk away, which wasn't far in those days, was the large city of Sepphoris (*sef-a-rus*). Excavations in the last few years have shown it to be a city of about 30,000 people. It was a city of culture, shopping, and relative wealth (p. 15). Many of the people of Nazareth would have walked to Sepphoris to work, to shop and to sell their goods in the markets. We can easily imagine Joseph, and later Joseph and Jesus, walking to Sepphoris daily to do their work as tektons. (see p. 15)

There is a much deeper level to Joseph's character that we hear in the Bible story that was read this morning. If we learn a bit about the marriage practices of his day, we'll see more about who Joseph was.

When Mary and Joseph were engaged, it was a year-long engagement contract, created by a ceremony conducted by the rabbi, under Jewish law. Following that year, a couple were married by

the rabbi and married life together began.

But in Mary and Joseph's life, as we know, life did not follow the traditional plan at all. Mary was told by the Angel Gabriel that she was to have a son, who through the mysteries of God would be God's Son. And in the amazing bravery of that strange visitation Mary said: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

But then she had to tell her fiancé Joseph. And in that moment Joseph was like any man who hears his wife-to-be is pregnant and he knows the baby isn't his. He didn't believe this far-fetched story of hers. He thought she'd been unfaithful; his heart must have been broken. So, Joseph began to make plans to quietly divorce her, breaking their binding one-year period of engagement.

This seems like an understandable plan, given the circumstances, until we learn a bit more about the religious laws of the time. Matthew wants to make sure later readers understood, so we read this morning: "but Joseph, being a man who loved and served God, and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly."

It's the word "quietly" that tells us more about who Joseph was. Hamilton explains that under the religious laws of the day, there were two directions Joseph could take this situation.

If he told the rabbi and the village that Mary was pregnant and he wasn't the father, the religious law said that a woman who committed adultery would be stoned to death.

The other option, and the one Joseph was choosing was to divorce Mary quietly.

But if you've ever lived in a small town, you know that word travels quickly, even quiet actions become headline news pretty quickly. The people of Nazareth would know that he had divorced her.

They would soon learn she was pregnant, because some things can't be hidden.

Then people would assume Joseph was the father,  
but he was abandoning Mary.

Hamilton says, then the shame would be on him, not on Mary. Not only was Joseph a man who took his religion seriously, he was a kind, compassionate man who wanted the very best for Mary, even if she had broken his heart (p. 48).

He was willing to take on the shame and disgrace, so that Mary didn't have to.

Both of their lives would be changed forever, but Mary would be safe.

But then God's messenger intervened again, and this time Joseph was visited by an angel. He was told in a dream that he shouldn't be afraid to take Mary as his wife. Her child was from the Holy Spirit. The baby would be a son, and Joseph and Mary were to name him Jesus, because he would save his people.

The Bible doesn't give us any of the words Joseph spoke, but his actions speak so loudly. He was "stirring the oatmeal" even when life seemed so incredibly difficult and out of control. Joseph was choosing to love.

This faithful man who has often been an afterthought in the telling of the story of Jesus' birth, has many things to teach us in this season of Advent.

He shows us a trust in God and God's plans that change our lives. His trust is powerful to witness. Joseph was loving, faithful and courageous in the face of his life being turned upside down.

There is one other voice I'd like to add to the picture of Joseph we're painting. The Presbyterian poet Ann Weems, also invites us to see a more complete picture of Joseph in her poem "Getting to the Front of the Stable."

Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?

Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,

And told him to stand in the back of the crèche  
 background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?  
 God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful  
 in spite of the gossip in Nazareth,  
 in spite of the danger from Herod.  
 This man, Joseph, listened to angels  
 and it was he who named the Child  
 Emmanuel.

Actually, Joseph probably stood in the doorway  
 guarding the mother and child  
 or greeting shepherds and kings.  
 When he wasn't in the doorway,  
 he was probably urging Mary to get some rest,  
 gently covering her with his cloak,  
 assuring her that he would watch the Child.  
 Actually, he probably picked the Child up in his arms  
 and walked him in the night,  
 patting him lovingly  
 until he closed his eyes.

This Christmas, (and this Advent) let us give thanks to God  
 for this man of incredible faith  
 into whose care God placed the Christ Child.  
 As a gesture of gratitude,  
 let's put Joseph in the front of the stable  
 where he can guard and greet  
 and cast an occasional glance  
 at this Child  
 who brought us life.

*Getting to the Front of the Stable* Weems, Ann,  
*Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1980, p. 50

Joseph shows up in our manger scenes, but doesn't show up much in the Bible, or in Google searches, or in our thoughts I would guess. In this season of Advent Joseph invites us to quiet faithfulness to our God, going wherever God calls us, even when the change is monumental.

Joseph invites us to love the people God has put into our lives,  
 even when they are most unexpected.

Joseph, the simple carpenter, invites us to invest in our day to day lives:  
 He invites us to stir the oatmeal with love.

"Who needs Joseph, anyhow?"  
 We do!

He beckons to us from the back of the stable, showing us his Son of Love, and showing us a path through this season of Advent and beyond.

May the quiet life of this loving tekton, Joseph of Nazareth,  
 remind us that God can use anyone,

even you and me,  
 to welcome the Son of God,  
 and then change the world with the love we've found at the manger.  
 AMEN.

Hamilton, Adam, *The Journey—Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

**Bulletin Cover:**

**Joseph's Song**

How could it be this baby in my arms  
 Sleeping now, so peacefully  
 The Son of God, the angel said  
 How could it be?

Lord, I know He's not my own  
 Not of my flesh, not of my bone  
 Still Father let this baby be  
 The son of my love

Father show me where I fit into this plan of yours  
 How can a man be father to the Son of God  
 Lord for all my life I've been a simple carpenter  
 How can I raise a king, how can I raise a king?

He looks so small, His face and hands so fair  
 And when He cries the sun just seems to disappear  
 But when He laughs it shines again  
 How could it be?

Father show me where I fit into this plan of yours  
 How can a man be father to the Son of God  
 Lord for all my life I've been a simple carpenter  
 How can I raise a king, how can I raise a king?

How could it be this baby in my arms  
 Sleeping now, so peacefully  
 The Son of God, the angel said  
 How could it be? How could it be?

--Michael Card

On: *The Final Word* album

Use for Children's Sermon next time: *Father and Son: A Nativity Story*, by Geraldine McCaughrean