

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
December 8, 2019, The 2nd Sunday of Advent
 Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25
The Journey--Walking the Road to Bethlehem with Joseph

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 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. I encourage you to YouTube it, and listen to it later.

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 Melanie 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, saying what many before her have thought, answered:

"Who needs Joseph, anyhow?"

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

This morning I am inviting us to think about why we need Joseph "anyhow" in the manger, and in our own faith journeys in Advent. As the book that was read during the Children's Sermon reminds us, there is a lot more to the man Joseph than the few stories we have about him in the Bible.

Father and Son: A Nativity Story, by Geraldine McCaughrean

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.

As I thought about Joseph this week, I was reminded of a strange reading that was given at a wedding I did a few 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.

He 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 the angel’s messages and he lived the path his life took, and loved his wife Mary, love and helped raise Jesus

and 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 he was “stirring the oatmeal”

as he loved and nurtured and protected his young son Jesus,
 as he worked as a carpenter,
 as he walked with Jesus to the synagogue,
 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.

In this second week of Advent we will learn about more about Joseph as we continue to use the book that was read last year by one of the Adult Sunday School classes. The book shaping our Advent sermons is by the Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton, and is entitled: “*The Journey, Walking the Road to Bethlehem.*”

Hamilton writes that the word used to describe Joseph 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.

Hamilton reminds us that woodworking tools have changed very little through the centuries, with the exception of power tools of course. So, the next time you grab a hammer, axe, saw, or a mallet, let yourself imagine that tool in the hand of Joseph. Let it remind you to learn from him. (Hamilton, p. 45-46)

Last week we learned that Nazareth in those days was a tiny village of 100 to 400 people. There wouldn’t have been much work for Joseph there. But just an hour’s walk away was the large city of Sepphoris. 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)

While he was writing his book, Adam Hamilton interviewed a team of carpenters at a construction site. He asked them, “based on what they knew of carpenters, what they thought Joseph would have been like and why they thought God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of Jesus.”

He writes: “Their responses were quite moving. They thought Joseph would have been a man who liked to work with his hands, one who put in a hard day’s work and took pride in what he had done. They imagined him as someone who enjoyed working outdoors or in his shop and who understood the importance of doing something right the first time. Those who had sons could also picture Joseph teaching his trade to Jesus as his son grew up.

Humble, hardworking, honest, a craftsman, a person who took pride in his work—these are a few of the images...” (p. 46)

But 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 practices of his day, we’ll see more about who Joseph was.

As we learned last week, 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. 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 her, 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 righteous man, (a man who loved and served God), and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her (meaning 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.

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 messengers 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. He 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.

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. 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 simply live our day to day lives: He invites us to stir the oatmeal with love.

This week I received an email that captures the kind of faith and life that quiet Joseph invites us to live this Advent and beyond. It came in one the many ads for new books that comes in a pastor's emails. The book quotes Leo Buscaglia:

“The majority of us lead quiet, unheralded lives as we pass through this world. There will most likely be no ticker-tape parades for us, no monuments created in our honor. But that does not lessen

our possible impact upon the world, for there are scores of people waiting for someone just like us to come along: people who will appreciate our compassion, our encouragement, who will need our unique talents. Someone who will live a happier life merely because we took the time to share what we had to give. Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have a potential to turn a life around..." - Leo Buscaglia, *Born for Love*

Quoted in an ad for the book: CPR for the Soul, by Tom Stella https://www.woodlake.com/cpr-8/index.html?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Bundle%20CPR%20&utm_content=Bundle%20CPR%20+CID_550fa38aa47c7738b57a19ac5352a1b8&utm_source=&utm_term=CLICK%20HERE

"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.

The Advent Sermon Series is based in part on the book: 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