

“Joseph of Bethlehem”

Date: December 7, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Micah 5:2-5; Matthew 1:18-25

Occasion: Advent 2, series, “The Journey”

Themes: Bethlehem, Joseph, humility,

We turn our attention this week to the other half of Jesus’ parenthood: Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, a good and decent man, who learned that his young bride-to-be was “with child.” He also knew that *he* was not the father. I’d like us to take a quick look at Bethlehem and then a closer look at Joseph.

Bethlehem in Joseph’s day was a village of perhaps 500 to 1,000 people. It was a two hour walk, six miles, from Jerusalem. Bethlehem means “House of Bread.” It was home to laborers and shepherders, but it was also home to farmers who grew wheat and barley.

Likely, it was also home to millers and bakers, hence the name, “House of Bread.” We can guess that bread was baked there and then probably delivered to customers in Jerusalem.

Unlike Nazareth, which was virtually unknown, Bethlehem was a well-known town. Though not large, it was known as the place where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Rachel’s husband, Jacob, buried her near this town and built a monument to her that stood for hundreds of years.

Bethlehem was also the setting of the Book of Ruth. Ruth’s great-grandson was a child named David, a shepherd boy whom Samuel the prophet anointed to be king over Israel. Before assuming

the throne and while still a boy, David slew the giant, Goliath with just a slingshot and a few smooth stones.

Bethlehem became associated with David, the great king. The city became known, along with Jerusalem, as “The City of David.” Several hundred years after the time of David, Micah the prophet foretold a day when a new king would come from Bethlehem:

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.” (Micah 5:2)

Little boys growing up in the village of Bethlehem would pretend to be David, killing the giant Goliath, or David the great king. They grew up knowing that the Messiah would come from their midst. And yet, it should be noted that even in the days of Joseph, the town of Bethlehem was primarily a working class town of people.

Once more, we find that God demonstrates a preference to choose and use people who live in relative obscurity, and whose lives and spirits reflect true humility. It is this **humility** that stands out when considering Joseph and his story.

He doesn't speak a single word in the New Testament. He is mentioned only a handful of times in the Bible. The last time we hear of Joseph, Jesus is twelve years old. Joseph is mentioned only briefly after this reference to being Jesus' father. But, we don't even know whether he was still alive at that time.

So little is known about Joseph that by the beginning of the 2nd century, Christians began to develop traditions about him. We don't know whether those traditions are historically accurate or not. We do know from Mark 6:3 that Joseph was a carpenter.

In Israel very few homes are built of wood. Most in Joseph's day were made of stone. Doors and roofs would have been constructed by men like Joseph. He may also have built and repaired farming tools, an important role in farming villages.

My Dad's sister, Mary, was married to a carpenter. It so happened that his name was Joe. We used to visit their home in New Jersey almost every Christmas when I was growing up. I have fond memories of being in their home and in their presence.

Uncle Joe was humble, hard-working, honest, a craftsman, and a man who took pride in his work. Those are a few of the images that I have in my mind when I think of Joseph, the father of Jesus.

When Joseph first learns that Mary is pregnant, before they had even been married, Joseph is understandably upset. According to the Law, he could have had her stoned. Instead, he decided to quietly divorce her.

It was not his obedience to the law, nor his pursuit of justice, that defined Joseph's righteousness. Instead, it was Joseph's compassion and mercy that led Matthew to call him righteous. In a dream, Joseph is told the truth about the child who grew in Mary's womb, and Joseph decides to marry his betrothed.

Jesus is born and grew to be a man. While we don't read it explicitly in the Gospel, we can infer from the life and teachings of Jesus the profound impact Joseph had on Jesus' faith. When Jesus looked for a metaphor to describe his relationship, and ours, to God, his primary form of addressing God was *Abba* – the Aramaic word for Papa. It is likely that even as a boy Jesus saw in Joseph a picture of the love and character of God.

In the parable of the prodigal son, where Jesus likened God to a father who showed mercy to a son who had squandered his inheritance, while showing patience with his older son who judged his younger brother. Could this parable be a reflection of Jesus' own experience of Joseph's mercy and love? I think it is.

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 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.

You and I may never receive recognition or the praise of others, but we are called to serve anyway, seeking nothing more than God's satisfaction and glory. May it be so. Amen? Amen.

Adapted from Adam Hamilton's book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, "Joseph of Bethlehem," pp. 37-55.