

Joseph, the Foster Father
2nd Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
December 4, 2005

For this and the next three Sundays, I want you to go with me to Bethlehem. With you, I want to look more closely than we have before at the faces of those whom we find gathered around the manger there. (1) Because you and I are so familiar with the Christmas story, it is tempting to assume that we already know all there is to know about Mary and Joseph, the angels abiding in the fields, the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, the lowing cattle, the sleeping baby around whom all of human history revolves. I believe there is so much more to know. The deepest and most beautiful mystery of all is the mystery of the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus.

I believe that something new and redemptive is waiting for us at the manger this year. If we look afresh at those who played the most important roles in the drama of redemption, I am convinced that you and I will see heretofore unforeseen possibilities for our own lives. We will bow with greater awe than ever before the miracle of Christmas. As John puts it so eloquently in his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . .and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1, 14)

Do you want to go with me, now, to Bethlehem to seek both the divine essence and the human face of Christmas? I must confess that I can hardly see the face of the character I want to introduce to you today. Can you see him over there in the shadows, looking as if he is not exactly sure what his role is? We are not so sure ourselves, are we? He is a husband, but he is not like

other husbands. He is a father but a really funny kind of father. If he just slipped quietly off stage, not many would even notice.

One Christmas, when I was setting up one of our several manger scenes around the house, I realized that in the little Mexican manger scene that we have kept for a number of years, Joseph was missing. I carefully went through the tissue paper. I looked in all the boxes several times. I could not find Joseph, but I didn't get in a sweat about it. I simply commandeered one of the shepherds. He stood by Mary until the holidays were over, and no one ever noticed. But how much poorer Christmas would be without Joseph! Actually, there would be no Christmas story at all without him. Today, I want to give three cheers for this man about whom we know little. The Scriptures tell us little. We know that he was of the house and lineage of David, which locates him and his family within the context of Jewish history and faith. We encounter him in Matthew as he is trying to get his mind around the biggest mess you can imagine. He is engaged to a young woman who has turned out to be pregnant. He is not the father of the baby. This was a particularly scandalous situation for a righteous Jew to find himself in. And believe me, it was no picnic for the mother-to-be either. Mary's condition was evidence of what was considered to be adultery, and under the law the pregnant woman could be punished by execution, the preferred means being stoning in public. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous, just man. But what is justice? What is righteousness in this difficult situation? (2) Does Joseph abide by the law and allow her to be condemned and publicly executed? Joseph decides to break the law himself. With great personal courage and integrity, he chooses to do, not what the law required, but what integrity demanded. He went beyond a strict interpretation of the letter of the law in response to the crisis.

Imagine how wounded his heart and pride must have been by the assumed betrayal of his bride to be. That wounding notwithstanding, he will not expose her to public shame and disgrace or worse, and so he resolves to divorce her quietly.

How often in this life does the choice between justified righteousness and underserved mercy present itself to us? How tempting it is to allow one's heart to harden and to forget that God shows more mercy to all of us than any of us could ever deserve. Joseph was a righteous man who understood righteousness in terms of mercy.

The great theologian Soren Kierkegaard loved Joseph better than just about any other person in the scriptures because he saw in him a perfect example of the kind "fear and trembling" that characterizes authentic faith. (3) What drives your heart and your decision making when your faith is authentic is your relationship with God, the merciful God who is greater even than God's own law. It is not that Joseph chose compassion over justice. Joseph understood justice to be compassion. Isaiah, the prophet of old, had described the savior whom the Hebrew people looked forward to as a merciful servant. "A bruised reed he will not break." Think of Mary as a bruised reed. "A dimly burning wick, he will not quench." (Isaiah 42:3) The one whom the Lord will send will exercise justice as mercy. Without justice-loving Joseph, in the sense of having compassion for Mary who was vulnerable and in a terrible situation, Mary and her unborn baby would have surely been stoned to death. (4)

Are you beginning to see you see why this good man should not remain in the shadows of the Christmas story? But don't put a halo on him yet. First you have to look at the 20th verse of the first chapter of Matthew. It reads in the New RSV version, "As soon as Joseph resolved to divorce Mary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." The King James reads, "But while he thought on these things. . ." But if you go back to the original language, you find out

that the Greek verb usually is used to mean something like “to be concerned or angry at.” The noun form of the verb means anger, wrath, and rage. (5) Joseph was a man. He was a human being. Of course, he was angry and wounded. What I love about Joseph is that he was so human. He had passion and feelings and a sense of honor that had been betrayed. He was disappointed, but he did not let disappointment control what he did. He fumed, and for good reason, but when it came time to act, he rose to higher ground. And so it is with us, isn't it? We cannot help our feelings. People treat us wrong, they betray us. We become angry. Our feelings show up like weather systems: high pressure, low pressure, gentle breezes, howling winds. We cannot control how we feel, but we have all the control in the world through God's grace over how we actually respond and act. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, ought to be our role model in this regard. And what a role model he was for his son Jesus! Remember how Jesus said, even as he was suffering the indignity of the crucifixion, when he could have called down all the wrath of heaven on his enemies. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

Just as Joseph is making that crucially important moral journey from anger to acceptance, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and makes the astonishing announcement that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. He, Joseph, will get to name the baby, though the angel has the name already picked out. His name shall be Jesus, a great Hebrew word that means “God saves.” The baby will be the savior of the people. And now, Joseph has still another chance to rise or sink. He has moved from anger to acceptance. He has acted to protect a person who has apparently betrayed him. He has redefined righteousness as compassion. And now he can become even more the man that God was calling him to be. He can either choose to duck and run, or he can catch the wild curve the angel has thrown at him. Do you see him standing there with his hands open? He catches the

ball and he says: I will be the steward of the promise of God to save the world. He does the socially unacceptable thing, trusting that God will be present in, through, and with the baby that will be born in a way that God has never been present in human history. And because Joseph trusted, human history itself has never been the same. He is an indispensable part in the genesis of Jesus.

Who was it if not Joseph who made sure that Mary made it to the manger so that the baby could be delivered? Who was it who took his family to safety in Egypt when Herod was about to search for the child Jesus to destroy him? Who was there when Jesus cut his first tooth and took his first step? Who taught him how to smooth a rough piece of wood? Who taught him how to drive a nail all the way home?

And on the night that Jesus was born, Joseph stood by offering by his presence an extraordinary sense of comfort. By his constancy he held up his little family. You could legitimately say that on the night that Jesus was born Mary did the heavy lifting. Hers was the labor, hers were the birth pains. But Joseph did what he was there to do. He was there representing every single person who has tried to care for his or her family as best we could against formidable odds. He represents all who want to help and do not know exactly what to do. (6) He represents every person who has ever been open to a change of plans in order for God's new future to born.

I don't know whether there by the manger he could see the shadow of the cross falling across his son's cradle. I do know that shadows fall across every human life and that parents are often helpless in protecting their children from the dangers that lie ahead. I do know that of all the people who were at the manger when Jesus was born, Joseph is the one who is most like us. Neither he nor we have control over events. We wrestle with our emotions. Sometimes we have to run for our lives. But we're survivors and we make sure those we love are protected as best we

can. And when, much to our surprise, we're chosen to play our part in the drama of salvation, we, like Joseph, are willing to step up and say: I don't really get what it is I'm a part of. But somehow I sense that if I say yes, it will make all the difference in the world. Without the Josephs of this world, there would be no hope, no peace, no Messiah, no Emmanuel, no nothing on which to build a bright and promising tomorrow.

I don't know whether you've ever heard a sermon on Joseph before in your life, but I do know that our lives have been the poorer for not knowing him better. I hope yours is richer now for having spent a little time with this good man who, under a great deal of pressure, stepped up and did the right thing. Once you get to know him, you understand why God chose him to be the one who raised God's own son. Thanks be to God for all the men and all the women who are willing to be open to God's bright idea. Every time one of us says: I will do what is right, as best I can, it's Christmas again and again and again. (7)

In the name of the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Redeemer. Amen.

Notes:

(1) My thanks to J. Barrie Shepherd and his wonderful book, *Faces at the Manger*, for the inspiration for my 2005 Christmas sermon series. Upper Room Books, 1992, "Joseph, the Foster Parent."

(2) Kenneth E. Bailey, "Joseph and the Three Shocks in the Christmas Story," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Dec. 18-25, 1989.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Davies, p. 57.

(7) Fred Craddock, "God is With Us," *The Cherry Log Sermons*, Westminster John Knox, 2001,
p. 6.