

## Joseph and the Christmas Surprises

December 30, 2013

Matthew 2:13-23

Matthew's Christmas story differs radically from Luke's. Matthew's Christmas has no shepherds hearing angelic songs of glory and peace.

Quite the contrary, Matthew tells of political intrigue and death threats on the infant Jesus before he could reach his second birthday.

And Matthew's annunciation story focuses on Joseph not Mary.

Joseph...the husband of Mary.

The Bible doesn't really tell us that much about Joseph. Legend has it that he was an elderly widow. Supposedly that explains why he quietly disappears from the narrative sometime after Jesus becomes a teenager. But the Bible itself doesn't fill us in on those details.

We know Joseph was a descendant of King David. We know that when Jesus was conceived, Mary was engaged to Joseph. We are told that he was a righteous man—an observer of the Law of Moses. We can surmise that he was a kind man, since he was concerned about Mary's reputation and well-being as well as his own.

We know that Joseph spent time living in Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth. We know he was a carpenter, and we presume that he trained Jesus in that craft.

We know he provided for the religious instruction of his family and fully participated in the rituals and pilgrimages of the Jewish faith.

The Bible seems to indicate that Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus was born, and research of other materials that have become available to us bear this out.

Some people don't seem to be comfortable with this, and have chosen to conclude, instead, that either Joseph had children by a previous wife, so that Jesus had only half-brothers and half-sisters.

Others suggest that Joseph had no children and the brothers and sisters of Jesus to whom the Bible refers are really Jesus' cousins.

I'm not sure why Jesus having siblings is a problem for some folks. But in any case, what I've talked about thus far about sums up the facts of Joseph's life as recorded in the Bible.

When plays are written about New Testament stories, Joseph's name never appears on the marquee. If he shows up at all, he's always part of the supporting cast.

When it comes to Advent, John the Baptizer is the leading man. Joseph is a peripheral character indeed. He usually isn't mentioned at all until we get to Jesus' birth narrative on Christmas Eve.

Joseph isn't flashy. He isn't the central part of any narrative. He doesn't proclaim anything. He's an ordinary guy who's just doing his best to live an honorable life—faithful to his God and his family, respected by his peers.

That's why I wanted to talk about Joseph this morning. Because most of us, I think, spend our lives as peripheral characters in the Gospel narrative.

Most of us aren't flashy. Most of us are just ordinary folks doing our best to live honorable lives—faithful to our God and families, respected by our peers.

And it turns out that Joseph's story has a few things to teach about those very things.

One thing it can teach us is that sometimes the future you think you are preparing for is not what the Lord has in mind for you.

When we first hear of Joseph in chapter 1 of Matthew, he is, indeed, preparing. He is preparing to bring Mary home as his wife.

He and Mary are engaged. This was a more serious thing in that time and place than it is now. To break off an engagement in those days would require more than returning rings and canceling the wedding arrangements. It would require a divorce.

Even though they were not yet living together, they were legally bound to one another.

Joseph was preparing a place for Mary to come and live as his wife. If he was an elderly widow, perhaps this entailed rearranging his existing home to accommodate her.

If he was a young man, probably this entailed building additional room onto his parents' house or perhaps building a new house.

Joseph was preparing for a future of settling down with Mary to raise children while continuing his carpentry trade in his hometown.

He expected his leisure time to be rearranged. He expected his social calendar to be different. He expected to worry a little more when business was slow. He expected to know new joys when his sons someday read Torah before the congregation and his daughters someday gave him grandchildren.

Joseph did not expect to be having dreams full of messages from God Almighty. He did not expect to raise a boy that he did not father. He did not expect to be traipsing around the countryside on the run from Herod's soldiers.

Joseph did not expect to be responsible for the religious training and upbringing of God's Messiah and Redeemer of creation.

Sometimes the future you think you are preparing for is not what the Lord has in mind for you. And that leads to the second thing the story of Joseph has to teach us:

Sometimes it turns out that you are better prepared for what the Lord has in mind for you than you thought you were, and it's only in the obedience that you find out.

Before Mary turned up pregnant, Joseph had every reason to be confident about his anticipated future. He was a skilled craftsman, known in his community for his honesty and respectability.

He knew the responsibilities ahead of him. They might not always be easy, but they were well-defined, and the community was structured to support him as he carried out his duties as husband and father.

I'm pretty sure that Joseph's self-confidence was considerably more shaky when he found out that his responsibilities would be a little more complicated.

What does a carpenter know about traveling to foreign lands? What does a small-town craftsman know about outwitting the armies of the king and protecting the most precious baby ever born? What does an ordinary Joe know about raising the Messiah?

The first command Joseph received in his dreams was to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, even though she was pregnant.

Did he have the personal resources to live down the public disgrace, the shame of his peers, the rebuke of his family? Apparently, he did. But he only found that out after he obeyed the command.

The second command Joseph received in his dreams was to flee to Egypt with Mary and the child. Did he have what it would take to travel such a long journey with a new mother and an infant?

Would he be able to provide for them in a foreign land? Apparently, he did and he would. But he only found that out after he obeyed.

The third command Joseph received in his dreams was to return to Israel. He ended up settling in Galilee to avoid the attentions of Herod's son.

That turned out to be a good thing—something that fulfilled prophecy. But he only found that out after he obeyed.

Sometimes it turns out that you are better prepared for what the Lord has in mind for you than you thought you were, and it's only in the obedience that you find out.

In my years of ministry I have often heard people in the church, when asked to take on a responsibility, say something to the effect that "I can't do that – I don't have the skill."

I can't learn to sing, I can't teach, I can't, I can't, I can't..... Now sometimes it's probably just a reluctance or an unwillingness; but there are times, I'm sure when people may feel that they really don't have the ability to do something.

And, it might not be in the church. If you won't tell, I'll let you in on a secret – not everything God calls us to do is related to church work.

Maybe you have felt a strong leading in a certain direction – maybe even felt it was God's calling – but stopped short because of doubts.

Sometimes it turns out that you are better prepared for what the Lord has in mind for you than you thought you were, or think you are. It is only in the obedience that you find out.

There's another thing that this story of Joseph teaches us. We talked about repentance a lot during Advent in connection with John the Baptist and his message, and we talk about it every Sunday as a part of our worship. We know that there are things in our lives that we need to repent of.

But sometimes it isn't only the obvious sin, the big things that we need to repent of. (And if we're honest with ourselves and God, we know what those are).

Sometimes we need to repent of more subtle sin—things that aren't obviously bad, things that may even sometimes seem to be good.

Sometimes you have to repent of being too convinced that you are ordinary and have no particularly important part to play in God's plan for creation.

Joseph was an ordinary guy, from an ordinary family, living in an ordinary town, with an ordinary job. And God chose Joseph to be the earthly father to his Messiah.

God chose Joseph to be provider and protector, teacher and guide for Jesus as he was growing up. God chose Joseph for a supporting-cast role that was tremendously important.

Have you ever been convinced that you are too ordinary for God to use in any particularly important purpose?

Now, I'm sure we've all probably known or know of some people who had the opposite problem – they take themselves far too seriously. Although that bluster can sometimes be used to try to cover up feelings of inadequacy.

But enough psychology for the moment.

Have you ever doubted that the influence that you have on your children or your friends? You never know when your influence might be key in shaping someone for God's purpose for them.

Have you ever reached out to someone in need—someone you didn't know and you never saw again—and then doubted that it really made any difference in the long run?

You never know: that one conversation, that one experience of compassion from a stranger might turn out to be a turning point in that person's personal journey. Or, it might turn out to be a turning point in yours.

Sometimes you have to repent of being too convinced that you have no particularly important part to play in God's plan for creation.

Sometimes you have to repent of having your life too well-planned. Planning is a good thing. Goal-setting is a good thing.

But if our own plans begin to stand in the way of God's plans for us, then we have begun to move from prudence and responsibility to idolatry.

Joseph was in the midst of planning for the future he expected when God confronted him with a future he did not expect. Joseph's plans had to be laid aside.

Long-term planning gave way to living year-by-year, day-by-day according to God's grace and guidance, never quite knowing what danger to his family might come next.

Sometimes you have to repent of having your life too well-planned.

Sometimes, when you are confronted with the surprising action of God, you have to repent of doing things the way they have always been done and thinking that faithfulness to God and family is always obvious.

When Joseph found out that the woman he was engaged to was expecting a child, he knew the right thing to do. He was a righteous man, after all, and a kind one.

He knew that the right thing to do was to divorce Mary, and to do it quietly so that he might not add to the attention and shame that she was already experiencing. Joseph knew the law. Surely this was the right thing to do to be faithful to his God and to his family.

Well, in this case, no. In this case, Joseph found out that being faithful to God meant doing something entirely different from what at first seemed obviously right.

Sometimes, when you are confronted with the surprising action of God, you have to repent of doing things the way they have always been done and thinking that being faithful to God or family is always doing what seems obvious.

Sometimes, too, you have to repent of being too careful of maintaining propriety and thinking that gaining the respect of your peers is always a natural consequence of faithfulness to God.

Again, Joseph knew the right thing to do, the proper thing to do, the thing which would maintain his good standing in the eyes of his community.

But Joseph was wrong. In this case, it turned out that faithfulness to God required Joseph to violate the customs of his culture. In this case, faithfulness to God required acting against conventional propriety and risking the loss of the respect of his peers.

Sometimes, too, you have to repent of being too careful of maintaining propriety and thinking that gaining the respect of your peers is always going to be the outcome of being faithful to God.

Finally, sometimes we have to repent of perfectly reasonable expectations that are too low.

Joseph didn't expect anything particularly out of the ordinary to happen in his life. He was familiar with the circumstances of his life.

It was perfectly reasonable for him to expect to get married, settle down, have children, work hard in his craft, and grow old in the same town in which he grew up. It is likely that that is what his father did, and his father before him, and his father before him. Perfectly reasonable.

But God had other plans. Plans which were utterly unimaginable. Plans that were beyond any reasonable expectation. Plans that were downright impossible!

Plans that called for a small-town carpenter to leave everything he had ever known to care for and protect a newborn baby with an earth-shattering mission.

Sometimes we have to repent of perfectly reasonable expectations that are too low.

And if you've been with me this far, perhaps you have sensed that the biggest thing we all need to repent of is thinking that we know better than God.

We know what we want, or at least think we do – what will be best, what will be “right.” Unfortunately, we too often make pleasing ourselves and other people the goal, and in so doing completely shut out what God is trying to get through to us.

Let's learn from Joseph. Let's be open to God and willing to obey. Chances are, we will discover, just as Joseph did, that God really does know best after all!