

Isaiah 7:10-16  
Psalm 80:1-7,16-18  
Romans 1:1-7  
MATTHEW 1:18-25

Sermon – December 23, 2007

## JOSEPH: A Great Husband and Dad

The Christmas Story is the most widely known *about* story in the entire New Testament. In addition to the over one billion Christians who, to a greater or lesser extent, actually participate at some level in religious observances at Christmastime, pictures of the Nativity are hard for others to miss even in this increasingly secular age. Christmas carols, Christmas cards, Christmas TV specials, the occasional outdoor religious Christmas display *images* of the Christmas story all have a wide currency.

And those Christmas card images make it look so tidy, cozy and peaceful: Mary and Joseph adoring the newborn Christ, animals around them, perhaps shepherds and wise men as well.

It's a tableau which to some people simply appears every Christmas without their necessarily understanding the drama, the surprises, the suspense and the incredible personal growth on the part of Joseph and Mary in particular for that scene to have taken place.

Drama? Suspense? Growth? Huh? Oh yes – it's all there and much more if we really read the whole story carefully from the Bible and don't go with what we may *think* we know of it. This is especially true if we concentrate on Matthew's version of the infancy narratives. (There are two versions, which differ in some ways; just read the first two chapters of Luke and compare them to the first two chapters of Matthew.)

We always read Luke 2:1-20 on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but this year The Twelve Days of Christmas are bracketed by two compelling and powerful readings from Matthew: the visit of the Wise men (Matthew 2:1-12) on January 6 (The Epiphany), and the conception and birth of Jesus according to Matthew 1:18-25 today.

Please take out your service leaflet and turn to today's Gospel and read with me the second and third sentences: "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

There it is: a large unexploded bomb right in Matthew's Gospel. *Christmas almost didn't happen.* If Joseph had indeed "dismissed" Mary – some translations use the word "*divorce*" here, indicating the process Joseph would have initiated to break off a betrothal in First Century Judea – Mary would have become an unprotected, unwed mother-to-be who would have been a pariah to everyone who knew her – *if she had lived at all.*

Joseph was, the Gospel says, a “righteous” man: he knew that she was pregnant and not by him, so the “righteous” thing to do was to divorce someone who, as far as he knew, had *already* been unfaithful to him, rather than marry an adulterer and raise someone else’s child as well. Joseph also was merciful: he was “unwilling to expose her to public disgrace.” “Public disgrace” is putting it mildly: the Old Testament decreed death as the punishment for adultery. If Joseph “dismissed Mary quietly,” there was a chance she could have left town under cover of darkness and go – *somewhere* far away, away from everybody and every place she knew, and have her baby, but be able to live.

Joseph already was showing extraordinary dignity and maturity as well as righteousness and mercy given the culture in which he lived, which was *extremely* patriarchal – chauvinistic, we’d say. Let me give you a couple of anecdotes which speak to this.

In 1973, I was on an archeological dig in the Holy Land. One of the professional staff members on that dig was a Palestinian man – educated, trained, fully qualified – who talked about having two sons and “three other children.” He didn’t even refer to them as his daughters. “Being a man” was all about having sons. To underline this, we knew him and addressed him not by whatever name he was given at birth, but as “Abu Issa” – father of Issa, his first born son. Once he had a son, that’s how he always wanted to be addressed. (This explains, by the way, why the Palestinian Authority’s President, Mahmoud Abbas, is also called Abu Mazer – father of Mazer.) I would be Abu-Thomas were I Palestinian.

While on that dig, our expedition had a visit from a Bedouin chief, who wanted to make sure we weren’t digging up his grandfather’s grave. (We weren’t, I’m very happy to say; it would have gone badly for us if we had been.) While having a conference with our chief Archeologist, the Bedouin chief was “checking out” all the co-eds from my college who were on the expedition. Suddenly, the chief pointed to one of my classmates and said, “I’ll take that one.”

He was serious.

He wanted to add her to his harem.

Our chief Archeologist, thinking quickly and knowing that we had “landed on the Bedouin chief’s planet” and had to deal with him in the context of *his* culture, not ours, quickly invented a very powerful fiancé for Debbie who, if anyone messed with her, would come from America with *his* brothers, uncles, cousins and friends and make big trouble. The chief couldn’t hide his disappointment, but accepted that explanation.

Now, if things were like that in 1973, do you think women had *more* status and *more* power in the year 3?

Oh, by the way, all Joseph had to do to divorce Mary was to say “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you.” That’s it. Settlement? Don’t be funny. A generous settlement in a case like this would have been “I’ll let you live,” which is what he offered.

So for Joseph to have done a 180-degree turn was *huge* – even if an angel was involved. Joseph came to understand that Mary’s conception was a miraculous, God-created, one-time event, *and that he had been commissioned by God* to be her husband – and Jesus’ adoptive father.

Adoptive.

Not biological.

Joseph, who no doubt had dreamed of becoming “Abu – somebody,” now had to get his mind around the concept of his first-born son being somebody whose conception he had nothing to do with. *And* he had to come to terms with the notion that, though he was a direct, lineal descendant of the great King David himself, the long awaited Messiah – the “Son of David,” would not, biologically, be his son.

Joseph would not, biologically, be Jesus’ father. **But he would be Jesus’ dad.**

This is where this story suddenly gets very 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Parenting is not just about biology – and Joseph, of all the saints of history, is our example here. Joseph had to make a huge leap, given his upbringing and culture, to accept his role as the *adoptive* father of the Messiah, but he did as the angel commanded him: **He**, Joseph, called the child’s name “Jesus” when the baby was named at his *briss* (circumcision) on the eighth day of his life. Joseph publicly declared, “This is my son.” And, no doubt, he told Mary right after his dream that he would do that. Then Mary was able to breathe again, and the story could move on towards the “Christmas card” tableau.

Suspense? Drama? Surprises? Personal growth? Yeah, we got that. But it’s not over yet.

I once invited a graduate student in Art History to come to a Sunday school class and show slides of paintings of the Nativity. Most of the slides, however, literally illustrated a disturbing idea, disturbing especially to the boys in the class. After the sixth slide of *Mary* and Jesus, one boy, in anguish, cried out, “Where’s Joseph?”

Well, where indeed? For the rest of the class, we played “Where’s Joseph” with the art, except that unlike with the “Where’s Waldo” game, we often could not find Joseph in the pictures. This was disturbing – and biblically inaccurate. Joseph definitely *was* “in the picture” in the Bible – and a good thing, because the surprises, suspense, drama and personal growth were far from over even in the Nativity stories, after Jesus’ birth.

Right after the other Wise men came, according to St. Matthew, Herod sent his storm troops to Bethlehem to kill all the boys in town under two years old to be sure to kill Jesus, the heir to his throne. Joseph was tipped off in advance in a dream that the only thing between Herod’s storm troopers and *his* baby was his own ability to get Jesus, Mary and himself out of town. Joseph smuggled all of them out of town and out of the country – all the way to Egypt.

So Jesus spent his toddler years *as a refugee in another country*. I wonder...if some of the people in our country today who make political speeches demonizing immigrants and refugees remember that our Lord and Savior was once a refugee himself?

And then, when Herod died but was succeeded by his also dangerous son, Joseph elected not to return to his ancestral homeland of Bethlehem of Judea, but to resettle the family in the north of the Holy Land, in Galilee, just outside the destroyed (and then being rebuilt) regional capital of Sepphoris, where carpenters were needed. So they journeyed to a new place and a fresh start and never went home again, as far as we know, after they settled in Nazareth.

Anybody here bring their family to another country for a safer life and a better life? Just like Joseph did.

So Joseph really should be considered the patron saint of **adoptive parents**. Adoptive parents, men *or* women, whatever your family looks like, take a bow. And know that Joseph is cheering you on.

And Joseph could be considered the patron saint of **refugees and immigrants**. And everyone in this church, and in this country, is either an immigrant or the descendent of immigrants. Even the Cherokees came to North America from somewhere else, and like Joseph, they walked.

And Joseph also could be considered the patron saint of all those who have come to understand that God's will is not for men to have all the power, but for men and women to work together as fellow servants of God in accordance with their individual abilities and circumstances. You know who you are. Joseph grew up in a very traditional culture, and then, by the grace of God, he really grew up. And he was no less strong, no less protective, no less resourceful, no less hard-working, no less a man's man after he realized that God had spoken to Mary directly and commissioned her for an awesome ministry – *without* his finding out about it first. Joseph is the patron saint of **guys who get it**.

And finally, Joseph is the patron saint of **dads**. When my son was in pre-school, one day I arranged my schedule to be the “parent of the day” for his class. When it came time for all of us to sit down for story-time, *three* boys dashed for my lap. Tom elbowed them out of the way, saying, “He's *my* Daddy.”

Those other boys had no daddies in whose lap they could sit for story time. I wished I could have cloned myself.

Guys, don't be the “missing lap” in the lives of your kids. And tell the other guys *what* they're missing *if* they're missing. As a coffee mug Tom gave me says, “Any man can be a father, but it takes someone special to be a Daddy.”

Let's keep Joseph in our picture of the Nativity story. He is definitely a saint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard**

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

Monmouth Junction, NJ