

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, January 2, 2011.

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Scripture gives us so many rich stories in the Christmas season. Every year we love to tell again the story of a young woman and the man to whom she was betrothed, making their way to Bethlehem where she gives birth in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. We love the story of shepherds tending their sheep and angels above them singing “Glory to God in the highest”; and then the shepherds going to a stable and finding a baby in a manger; the story of the wise men following a star and bringing their gifts to the baby; and these same wise men outsmarting an evil king.

In these stories, we see the devotion and unquestioning acceptance of Mary, the evil paranoia of Herod and the quiet actions of Joseph. These and other Gospel stories give us insight into Mary, her dedication to God, her love of her son, how she knows from the beginning that he is destined to do great things. We know of many things she witnesses and ponders in her heart. We weep with her as she watches her son die.

In King Herod, we see the dark side of the Christmas story. Herod was an insanely jealous man who was responsible for the murder of many, including members of his own immediate family. As further proof of Herod’s violent ways, history tells us that he knew few, if any, would mourn for him, so he arranged to have numerous people in Jerusalem executed on the day he died so that there would be mourners in the city. When kings from distant lands told Herod of this baby they sought, he felt threatened and tried to eliminate what might be his competition. He had all the male children in and around Bethlehem killed.

In the Gospel reading for today, we hear a story with Joseph as the main character. God thwarts Herod’s evil plan by telling Joseph in a dream to take his family and flee to Egypt. And he does. And a few years later, another angel tells Joseph, again in a dream, that it’s safe for his family to return to Israel. And so they do.

What do we know of this man Joseph? In late medieval and renaissance art, Mary and Jesus, the Madonna and Child, get most of the attention. The baby Jesus is often portrayed as chubby and smiling knowingly. And Mary is generally pictured as very young. More often than not, Joseph is not in the picture at all. And if he is, he is usually in the background and appears as very old, often stooped. What is true in the art world is also true in the world of music. Baby Jesus and Mary get almost all the hymns. There are no Advent or Christmas hymns devoted to Joseph.

This is kind of strange, because the gospel of Matthew certainly gives a prominent role to Joseph in the opening chapters. In a way, Joseph gets more attention than Mary:

- * it is the genealogy of Joseph, not Mary, that begins Matthew's gospel.
- * it is the predicament that Joseph finds himself in that pushes the story forward.
- * it is the angelic dreams given to Joseph that move the story from Bethlehem, then to Egypt, then back to Judea, and eventually to Nazareth. Joseph and his dreams drive this story.

From scripture we know that Joseph was a carpenter by trade. We know that he was of the line and house of David, and, as such, he was required for the census of Caesar Augustus to register in his hometown of Bethlehem. And we know that he was pledged to be married to a young woman named Mary. We know that Joseph, upon learning that Mary was carrying a child that was not his, had in mind to quietly seek to be released from his bond to become her husband. We know that the angel Gabriel came to him in a dream with the word of the Lord, instructing him to take Mary as his wife and not to fear, for the child she was carrying was the

Son of God. We know that "Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." We know that the Holy Family fled into Egypt upon word from the angel that Herod the Great sought to kill the infant Jesus out of jealousy and raging paranoia. Then when Herod died, and his son Archelaus reigned over Judea, our text tells us that Joseph was afraid of returning there, so God instructed him to go to the region of Galilee, which Joseph did and settled in the town of Nazareth. We also know that Joseph was still alive when the boy Jesus was twelve years of age, when the family went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover.

What we do not know about Joseph was when or how he died, for Scripture does not tell us even that he died. Scripture says little about him.

So why doesn't Joseph generate more attention? Why doesn't he get more exposure? I remember a time in Sunday school when I was a teenager, and we were challenged by our teacher to search the Gospels and tally how many times Joseph speaks in the Gospels. Yes, it's a trick question, because the answer is "none". Not once. Joseph has no lines in the Christmas pageant; he has no beautiful hymn to God that is his counterpart to the Magnificat. The writers of the Gospels saw no reason to have him speak. Yet what we do know about Joseph is that he *does* – he does what God calls him to do. Joseph recognizes the messages and messengers from God, and he does what they tell him, apparently without question or hesitation. We all know the world famous Nike slogan "Just do it." Joseph could be the centerpiece for that ad campaign. We know so little about Joseph, but we have all that we really need to know. This carpenter, this righteous man was a means by which his adopted son, Jesus, the Messiah, could win our salvation. Preachers and teachers, songwriters and artists portray Joseph as quiet, unassuming, avoiding the spotlight. Probably so, but I also see Joseph as a man of determination and of action, a man of strength who trusted God with his whole heart. Through an angel God told Joseph to take his family and move Egypt, to a foreign land, where they had no home, no job, where nothing was familiar. And Matthew tells us simply, "Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt." He heard; he listened, and he did.

He took his family to and from Egypt to fulfill prophecies, according to Matthew. But he did so because it was not yet time for Jesus to die. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus moved to Egypt and to Nazareth to spare the Christ child's life so he could grow up to die for us. Jesus was born with a price on his head. From the moment Herod heard about this child, he wanted him killed. But God had other plans for his son. He used Joseph to protect Jesus, the child. As the caretaker of this child, Joseph was not allowed to live life the way he had planned it. He lived by God's plan. I am constantly reminded I must do the same – it's God's plan for my life, not my plan that sometimes includes God. Being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus, is not about me, not about my comfort, my success. It's about grace and being loved in such an amazing way that I am then called to love, to reach out, to protect others in whatever contemporary form they are found.

God sent Jesus into this world to turn things upside down. Our Gospel today reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus entered a world of real pain, of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast of an unwed mother; he was homeless, a refugee. He is the perfect savior for outcasts, refugees and nobodies. Not a mighty king who wielded power over armies of men. God turned Joseph's simple, unassuming life upside down. But in this, God was creating a pathway for Jesus to remain protected until his destined time came. In the face of violence all around, God hid and protected his son until he was ready to go to Jerusalem and die there.

What can we learn from Joseph? Hopefully none of us will have to scoop up our families and leave town in the dark of night, fearing for our lives. Although we know this happens everyday in many parts of the world. But we can look to Joseph as a person of action without a lot of talk; a man who was given instructions, listened to them and followed them. What Joseph demonstrates for us is how to listen to and obey God's call. Joseph said – with his actions, not words – 'Yes, Lord. I hear what you are telling me, and I will do it.' Like Joseph, our job is with a community larger than our comfort zone. We are called to embrace the entire family of God;

those who are lonely, those in need, the hungry, the sick, those who have come here seeking the safety and prospects for a brighter future that Joseph sought for his family in Egypt. There are so many opportunities for us to follow God's instructions. There are children of God in our community who need our care, food, clothing, shelter, our time and our presence. "Wake up and get moving," the angels tell us.

At this time of year when you are making resolutions to eat healthier, to go to the gym more often, look to Joseph, the quiet man who listened to God for his direction. I invite you to listen to the angels in your life – maybe they will come in your dreams as they did to Joseph, maybe they will be in the Sprague room during coffee hour, maybe they sit next to you in school or at work. Recognize them as messengers from God. Listen to where they tell you to go. Are they sending you to feed, clothe, love, welcome or teach God's children? Is God trying to turn your life upside down? Like Joseph, we can be people of action. Listen to what God is calling you to do, then go, as Joseph did, quietly, faithfully. In the face of violence and suffering in our world, find your way in this new year of 2011 to hold Jesus in your heart, to create a pathway for him through you to others. *AMEN*