

Joseph the Unsung Hero

“In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen”

In preparing for a sermon I often go back into the documents in my iPad to see if I've given a sermon on this Sunday in the past. As it turns out I did preach to you all last Advent 4. We had just started Year C so the gospel was from Luke. I started the sermon like this: “I am going to talk about women today. I think we should recognize the important and overlooked role women have played in scripture, and throughout history.” I went on to talk about how Luke's gospel in particular is filled with women, from Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, Mary the mother of Jesus, Jesus' good friends Martha and Mary of Bethany, his disciple Mary Magdalene, others. Luke refers to 45 women in his gospel, and continues to emphasize women in his second book “The Acts of the Apostles.” And further, Luke's genealogy of Jesus seems to trace backwards through his mother's side, not his father's. It is the lineage of Mary! I talked about how Mary the theotokos, the God-bearer, was able to listen to and experience God's presence in her life, and how she probably set an example for Jesus to listen for that Presence as well. And I talked about her song The Magnificat, unique to Luke's gospel, that she sang to Elizabeth, that bold counter-cultural expression of what God intends for creation to look like: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God...He has scattered the proud...he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...he has filled the hungry...and sent the rich away empty...” This is an alternative world she is describing, a vision of the coming Kingdom of God, surely different from what our world seems to have always been, and still is.

Today I want to look at another important figure in the Advent story, one also often overlooked, one who stands in the shadows of our Christmas celebration. It is Joseph, Mary's husband and the man who raised Jesus as a little boy and young man. Our gospel reading is from the first chapter of

Matthew, verses 18-25. If we look at the verses immediately preceding these, we find the genealogy of Jesus as Matthew sees it. It is quite different from what we see in Luke. This genealogy is that of Joseph, not Mary. It goes all the way back to Abraham, and ends "...Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

In our reading today Joseph finds himself in the middle of a scandal. He discovers that the woman to whom he is engaged is already with child. It's likely that his first thought is that she must have been unfaithful, for the baby could not be his. What is Joseph going to do now? Engagement, or betrothal, was equivalent to marriage, so infidelity counted the same as adultery. The punishment back then for a woman and for a man discovered this way, according to the law of Torah (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22) was death, by stoning! In addition, back then women who bore children out of wedlock were usually stoned to death. But Joseph is a righteous man, a good man, and does not want to humiliate Mary—to expose her to public disgrace—so he plans to dismiss her quietly, in fact the most humane of his options. He could have easily brought those charges against her. But before he does this he has a dream in which an angel explains to him that Mary's pregnancy is of divine origin. Joseph trusts this strange news, that this child is indeed from the Holy Spirit. The angel in his dream says "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus..." When Joseph awakens he does as the angel commanded. He marries her. By naming the baby, Joseph acknowledges him as his son, in effect adopting him, and thus incorporates him into David's genealogy. His decision not to leave Mary, or worse to expose her to the law and probable death, was like Mary's Magnificat a bold and daring counter-cultural way of handling the problem. Something entirely new was happening here, and Joseph must have sensed that. And he believed! Jesus is born, and the rest is history. What a story! Is it even believable? As an aside, let

me say this about this story and others we read in scripture: A lot of people get hung up on whether the stories we read in scripture are historically literally true. It is not that the facts within a story don't matter. It is just that the facts don't matter as much as what the stories themselves tell us. Stories can be true whether they actually happen or not.

Let's look at this man Joseph. The Church has made him the patron saint of a lot of things, including workers, families, fathers, immigrants, the unemployed, and even house hunters and sellers. We don't read much about Joseph in scripture, and none of his words were recorded. He seems to have been a village carpenter and likely taught Jesus about his trade. His last appearance is when he and Mary take Jesus to Jerusalem for Passover when Jesus is twelve, when Jesus goes off to the Temple alone for three days, his anxious and frantic parents thinking he is lost, or worse. It was because of another encounter with an angel that he took Mary and Jesus to Egypt, fleeing their home and crossing the border and living in that foreign land as refugees. This was to escape the wrath of Herod who, in trying to find and kill the child Jesus, ordered the murder of every child aged two years and younger, which we know of as the "slaughter of the innocents." It seems that Joseph was good at listening to God's voice and responding as God called him to do. Yes, Joseph was very instrumental not only in the birth of Jesus—as we have seen—but also in his life. The Christmas story also confronts us with this hard truth: Jesus enters the world not a protected child of power, but as one hunted by it. Joseph stands between the power and violence of Herod's rule over Israel and the lives of its vulnerable children. The entire story of Jesus, and consequently of Christianity itself, ends up depending upon this man Joseph—Joseph who listened when God spoke and who answered "yes," just as Mary had answered "yes."

I spoke a few weeks ago about the scriptural scholar Walter Brueggemann, who passed away this past June. The focus of that sermon was

on as he put it the “alternative reality,” or what I interpret to be “the Kingdom of God” that Jesus was always talking about. Cynthia and I are reading Brueggemann’s “Devotions for Advent, Celebrating Abundance.” His devotion on the first day of Advent was titled “Newness is on the Way.” This “newness” is what we are awaiting, expecting, and preparing for in Advent. It is the newness of Christ entering the world, of his Kingdom becoming reality. As Jim said in his sermon last week, we catch glimpses of this reality in the many acts of love and service that you are doing now, but it is a reality not yet fully realized. As we see in Mary’s Magnificat, this Kingdom—this alternative reality—is one of justice, mercy, compassion, generosity, nonviolence. It is what Jesus stood for and died for. It is the Gospel. And Joseph embodies this alternative imagination, this way of living that resists the dominant story of fear, control, self-preservation, domination by the powerful over as Jesus puts it “the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoners.” When Joseph first learns that Mary is expecting a child, his culture and his religion—the dominant story—would demand that he expose her, that she be shamed, that she be punished, probably stoned to death. Yet Joseph does not expose her. It requires strength to resist the dominant culture. Yet he does. He chooses mercy. He chooses compassion over punishment and violence. In protecting the life of Mary and later of Jesus he does what he hears God calling him to do. This highlights another quality of Joseph: his life is one of being faithfully present, of quietly and in stillness listening to God, even in the midst of a scandal that could ruin people’s lives. He does so selflessly and quietly. It reminds us that God often changes the world through people who will never be noticed. Joseph, this unsung hero of Advent and of the Christmas story, reminds us that the story is not only about singing angels and trumpets and glory. It is also about listening and trusting and obedience in the dark. The world was changed because this quiet village carpenter said “yes.”

Joseph's "yes," as does Mary's "yes," raises a question for us. How would we ourselves respond to such encounters with God? Can we too be a "God-bearer" who allows the Christ to live and act in the world through us? And how is it that we actually encounter and see and know God in our lives? How do we like Joseph become aware of that Presence? Perhaps it depends on how we envision God. If we think of God as this transcendent being somewhere out there or up there in the sky, separate from us, remote, then I think we miss the reality of God. God is life itself, love itself, interconnected with all of creation, right here in this moment, around us and within us, the glue that keeps this web of life alive. We are surrounded. God is everywhere: in the love of our partner; in the imagination that inspires our art, our creativity, our music and our liturgy; in the awesome beauty of creation. The author of Psalm 139 puts it well: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." God's Presence is inescapable, if we—like Joseph—will only look and listen.

What we celebrate this Advent season is the renewal—the refreshing—of our awareness of that Presence that is already here. Our tradition is that this celebration culminates on Christmas morning with the birth, once again, of the Christ Jesus. It is our reminder that the Christ is always coming, over and over again. It is our reminder that there is always a light shining in the darkness. Today December 21st is the Winter Solstice, the day with the least sunlight, the darkest day of the year. The light of the sun will shine longer now each day. Look for that light, as we celebrate the incarnation of the Christ. This Advent may we imagine that different world, that alternative reality. And may we awaken to the presence of the Christ that is already within us.

Rev. Bob Donnell 12/21/2025

