

Sermon for Zion, February 4, 2018 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Scripture: Matthew 1:15-25

Sermon Title: Joseph, the husband of Mary

*Matthew 1:15-25*

*...Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.*

*Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.*

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).*

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Ancient icons and paintings of the nativity often picture Joseph as not quite belonging to the scene, usually off in the corner, facing the other way, head in his hands. Sometimes, he’s asleep. Often, he’s an older fellow, looking more grandfatherly than bridegroom, well past the time of fathering a new baby boy.

Which is, of course, the point. The ancient artists were trying to tell us in no uncertain ways the same thing Matthew makes clear. We read a bit of the end of Matthew’s genealogical line of Jesus – “so and so was the father of so and so, who was the father of so and so,” and so on. But then we get to Joseph, and things change:

*...Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.*

See what happened there? From “Father of, father of, father of,” we suddenly went to “husband of,” finishing it off with, “*and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is*

*called the Messiah.*” Joseph isn’t the dad, says Matthew. He establishes the ancestral line, but he isn’t (as we say these days) the “biological father.” Matthew, just like the ancient artists, puts Joseph to the side.

You’ll notice something else about those old icons and paintings. Joseph is an old man. Balding, grizzled, grey. White-haired, even, making him even older than me. This, too, is a theological statement: just in case you thought that Matthew was fudging things a bit, just in case you suspected this virgin birth business to be a bit too hard to believe, well, look at Joseph. The man is past it. Mary is safe around him. We’ll just put him off to the side. Look, the old fellow can barely keep his eyes open. He’s off for another nap. No way he’s the father. He’s well past being a dad.

Just to make sure you got the point, church tradition also put forward the idea that old Joseph was a widower, that the “brothers” of Jesus mentioned in the Bible are a product of Joseph’s earlier marriage, that Mary was brought into the picture to take care of the fellow in his old age, to be a mother to the boys. Nobody, it seems, expected Jesus.

But while the artists, and tradition, put Joseph to the side, Matthew isn’t finished with him yet. We expect the camera to focus upon Mary, as it does in the Gospel of Luke – entire chapters filled with Mary thoughts, words, songs. But Matthew, having made clear that Joseph, while the husband of Mary, is not actually Jesus’ father, takes some time to explain.

And in the Gospel of Matthew, explanations most often tie the story back to the Old Testament, back to the longer, older story of the People of God. And this time, Matthew remembers another Joseph, the Joseph of the Book of Genesis, the Joseph of the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat. That Joseph (who looked like Donny Osmond) became famous for two things. The musical (which we’ve mentioned), and his dreams. Way back in Genesis 37, we hear about those dreams:

*Joseph had a dream. He said to his brothers, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” ...Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”*

As it turns out, those dreams proved accurate; following a series of adventures, which also involve dreams, Joseph ends up as Prime Minister of Egypt, and his brothers do come and bow before him, and all turns out well in the end.

And when, 1500 years after our Old Testament Joseph, our New Testament Joseph was born, his parents named him after that famous dreamer, and doubtless the

story of Old Testament Joseph was the favourite of New Testament Joseph, in the same way the Bible stories of Douglas would have been my favourites, had there been a biblical Douglas. And maybe those Old Testament stories made New Testament Joseph pay particular attention to his own dreams.

And in fact, Matthew tells us, our Joseph was a dreamer. We don't know much about him, but that much we do know. Somehow, as Matthew tells us, when God wanted to get something across to Joseph, it was through a dream he did it. They must have been pretty impressive dreams, too, because Joseph lived by them, even if that meant turning everything he knew on its head.

Who knows? Perhaps Joseph had always lived this way, from one dream to the next. Perhaps as he worked, day in, day out, plying his trade, building this, repairing that; perhaps he daydreamed the time away, dreamt about things past, things to come. Who knows? All we know is, that when these Christmas dreams came, he listened. That he awoke with a start, that the bed in which he found himself and the night which surrounded him seemed even less real, somehow, than the angel which had found its way into his sleep.

Not once, not twice. Three dreams, altogether, that Matthew tells us Joseph had. The first, the most famous of the dreams, comes when his sleep is already disturbed by the difficult decision which lay before him regarding his young wife-to-be. His heart ached when she had told him the story of the angel's visit, the announcement of the child to be born, her protestations that she had never known a man. And now, a child grew within her. When she had told Joseph, he heard only half of what she said, the rest of her story drowned out by the sound of blood rushing through his ears, his aching heart working overtime. But now, as he laid his head down for a night of fitful sleep, he could hear her story again and again, beginning to end, could feel afresh the breaking of his heart. And now, into this dream, came an angel of his own:

*“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, for he will save his people from their sins.”* And now he sat, bolt upright, eyes wide and unseeing in the dark of night, heart pounding, head spinning, the words of the angel still echoing in his ears.

“I had a dream,” he said, the next day, to Mary, who had not slept all that well herself. “You will be my wife,” he said, “and the baby's name will be Jesus.” Did they laugh, did they weep, did they embrace? We know no more than we are told, that Joseph did indeed take her as his wife, but, adds Matthew delicately, the marriage remained unconsummated until after Jesus had been born. All on the strength of a dream.

The next dream of which we are told is not a dream of Joseph, but one given to some professional dreamers, men by whom dreams were regarded as at least as important as the signs upon the ground and the signs illumined in the sky. “Wise men from the East,” Matthew calls them, men who had troubled to journey far from home on the basis of a mysterious star, a star which could only mean the birth of a king. Or the birth of one greater than a king.

So it was to a king they went, Herod by name. Herod was a mean piece of work, a king in the ancient tradition: bloodthirsty, paranoid, ruthless, vain. They stood before the king, these wise men, but their wisdom failed them, for they said, “*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.*”

“Well, now” oiled the evil Herod, his heart turning to stone at the very news, “let me see if I can find out.” Scholars revealed that Bethlehem was the place to look, so it was there to which Herod sent the Magi, and he placed upon them these instructions: “*Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word.*” And then he poured, into their ears, like poison, this final word: “*so that I may also go and pay him homage.*” Homage, no doubt, in the form of the sharp and unyielding point of a sword.

And off the Magi went, wise in the ways of the signs in the heavens but blind to the machinations of the king. To Bethlehem they went, guided by their star, guided as in a dream to the very house in which the Holy Family did stay.

But the real dream was yet to come. Having presented their royal gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant King, exhausted by their travels and the fulfillment of their quest, they tethered their weary camels and pitched their colourful tents under the light of the star which had guided them. And then they dreamt, these Magi, a dream of warning. All of them, just as Joseph had done, awoke with a start; all of them, just as Joseph had done, hearts racing, minds spinning. And all of them, realizing the import of the heavenly dream, roused their servants, packed their tents, extinguished their fires, watered their camels, and, before the light of the sun illumined the remains of their all-too-brief sojourn, returned to their country by another route. As Herod, like a spider in his web, awaited with increasing impatience the tidings of their return.

Yet the wise men were not the only dreamers that night. Joseph also dreamed a dream of warning, a dream which warned in no uncertain terms of the intentions of the king. The busy Angel of the Lord again brought news, less happy than that with which he first had been entrusted. “*Get up,*” was the news, “*take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.*” It does not take much to imagine the state in which Joseph awoke that

night. He, like the wise men, did not wait for the light of dawn, but under cover of dark roused his young bride and their infant son, and began the long trek to Egypt. Egypt, where Joseph's namesake, the Old Testament Joseph, had ended up too, those 15 centuries before.

Three years, says tradition, three years would pass before Joseph dreamed again. Every night of those three years, we can imagine him wondering if this would be the night, but it wasn't until after a thousand nights had passed in peace, when Joseph the dreamer dreamt again. The angel brought the news of Herod's death, a single death for all the suffering the mad King had inflicted upon the people, but a death which put to rest those who had sought the life of the child Messiah. For a few years, at least. "*Get up,*" was the news, "*take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.*" "*Get up,*" you notice, just like the last time; "*the child,*" not "*your child,*" just like last time; "*his mother,*" not "*your wife,*" just like last time. Angels, in dreams as in reality, seem very particular about such things. As is Matthew.

"*So he got up,*" it says of Joseph, just like after all the dreams, despite whether or not his better instincts told him to stay put and pull the covers over his head; so he got up, and went back home. But not to Judea, not to Bethlehem, where they had lived before; instead, warned afresh, dreaming anew, doubtless told to "get up," they went to Nazareth. "*So,*" we are told, "*was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene.'*"

So when we look at those old icons and paintings, and old Joseph is there snoozing away, it's dreaming he's doing. He's waiting for the angel in his dreams.

His story ends there, in Matthew. When next we hear of him, Joseph is only a memory. Jesus is preaching in Nazareth, and the townsfolk exclaim (Matthew 13:55), "*Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?*" This time, Joseph is only a memory; his trade remembered, his name forgotten. Once more put off to the side.

Luke, who doesn't pay much attention to Joseph, does give us one final clue. You remember the story of twelve-year-old Jesus being inadvertently left behind after the family visits Jerusalem? When finally they find him, Luke tells us this (2:48-50):

*When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

When Jesus is twelve, Joseph is still alive. And Jesus knows that his real father isn't Joseph at all. Had he always known? Or had it come to him then? Like his parents, who, we are told, "did not understand," maybe we'll never know.

We do know, though, that that's the last of Joseph we hear. Tradition hints that sometime thereafter, Joseph dies, the result of a construction accident, something to do with a ladder. Again, we'll never know. But tradition also tells us something else, in the name it gives to him: tradition always refers to him as, "The Faithful Joseph." Faithful to Mary. Faithful in his responsibilities to Jesus. Faithful to God.

That's quite a title. The Faithful Joseph. When you think about it, faithfulness couldn't have been easy. His story starts with suspicions that Mary hasn't been faithful to him. His story continues with him having to believe, on the basis of a dream, a most unlikely story indeed, a story that would bring them far from home, that would put them under threat of death, that would have them fleeing for their lives. A story that would ultimately put him off to the side, as important things happen, of which he is but a part. A simple carpenter. A rural tradesman. A story, we are told, which he would never fully understand. But what would the story be without him? Could the story be without him?

We, too, are part of a story, a story much larger than ourselves. It is the story of God coming to our broken and hurting world in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is the story of Jesus changing the lives of fisherman, tax collectors, women of Galilee, and of lives being changed, one by one, throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. One of those lives is yours. You, in following Jesus, in giving your life to him as Lord, are part of that story too.

Like Joseph, your part may not be obvious. Like Joseph, you may feel as though you are off to the side, while more important things happen around you. Like Joseph, you may not fully understand. But you, like Joseph, are part of that story too. And, like Joseph, as you are faithful to God's leading, as you are faithful to God's call, you are indispensable too. For there are people only you can reach; lives only you can touch. There are people – family, neighbors, friends – whom only you can reach with the love of God, the help of the Spirit, the Good News of Christ. With an invitation, a helping hand, a word. There are people who are waiting to see Jesus, and they will see him most clearly in and through you. People who can enter into this story, too.

So remember Joseph. White haired, dozing, off to one side. Seemingly unimportant. Never fully understanding. A simple carpenter, dreaming away. But what would the story be without him? Could the story be without him? What would the story be without you? May the story of Joseph inspire us all to be faithful, and to play our part in this greatest story of all. Amen.