

“Joseph’s story”

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25
(December 18, 2022)

Today we have the story of Jesus’ birth from the Gospel of Matthew. It’s a sparse rendition. No shepherds watching their flocks by night. No baby lying in a manger. The spotlight in our passage is on *Joseph*. Which is a good thing because, apart from this short cameo appearance it’s about the only attention Joseph gets. He has a minor role in all the Gospels. You can’t even find him in the Gospel of Mark.

But here, for this one brief moment, Joseph has an opportunity to shine. I’m reminded of something Joan Chittister, an American Benedictine nun, has written: “Everybody lives to do something that only they can do. Everyone is called, by virtue of what we love and what we do well, to give something to the world that will bear the stamp of our presence here. We are all called to add something to the creation of the universe.”¹

So this is Joseph’s big opportunity to add something. And it has me wondering what *our* contribution to the world might be.



Theotokos the Hodegetria. 14th century tempera on wood, National Museum of Serbia.

When you compare Joseph’s reputation to that of Jesus’ mother, Mary, the contrast is stunning! Mary is famous. She is revered, especially in some branches of the church.

The “blessed virgin,” she is called. “Theotokos” – in the eastern church, which means the bearer of God. Or “Mother of God,” we learned to say in the west. The “Queen of heaven.” “Our lady of ...” a thousand different things. Over the years, people have given Mary all these honours and more!

I’m not finding fault. I’m merely pointing to Joseph and asking “What about *him*.” Is he just an “ordinary Joe?” I wonder where we got that phrase? An ordinary Joe.

But what if *none* of us are all that ordinary? What if we all have something that makes us quite unique? What if every person sitting in this congregation has a contribution to make to the great unfolding of the universe?



I’ve been thinking about Joseph. And it seems to me he’s quite a remarkable person! Let me tell you why: Joseph lends Jesus his ancestral credentials. Joseph, humble though he is, comes from a *royal* line.

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, a great long list of names. And while we might skip over that part, it was important to Matthew’s audience. The main thing is that Joseph is linked with the house of David. He gives to Jesus a royal heritage, a rightful claim to be the promised Messiah.



¹ Joan Chittister (Called to Question p. 51)

So that's one thing. But something far more significant is the *kind* of person Joseph was.

You see, Jesus grew up in a human family – as we all do. And the kind of parents we have can make a huge difference to our lives.

Joseph was engaged to Mary. They'd entered into a legally binding arrangement. Just imagine the shock Joseph received when he found out his fiancé was pregnant!

And now he had a terrible decision to make. Because it wouldn't be long till the whole village became aware of it. Would he bring her before the elders and have her punished? It was certainly his right to do so.

But Joseph "was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace." Perhaps Joseph felt wounded, embarrassed, even betrayed. But rather than lashing out, he resolved to act with kindness. Now that takes *character*, don't you think? It shows, right from the start, the kind of person Joseph really was!



Statue of the Holy Family, Church of Saint Joseph, Nazareth.



And I can't help but think that character rubbed off on Jesus. We all have an influence on the people around us. The more caring people in our society, the better for everyone. The more fathers who embody genuine love, the more sons and daughters who will do that too.

Joseph put *love* over law. *Kindness* over strict and rigid righteousness. And that strikes me as very much the sort of emphasis that Jesus taught.



And here's another thing: Joseph did everything in his power to protect his family from harm.

King Herod went on a jealous rage, bent on finding the promised One of God. He sent his soldiers on a mad mission to kill every infant child in and around Bethlehem. When Joseph heard of it, he gathered up his family and took them by darkness of night to safety in the land of Egypt.

Joseph was a good man. A courageous man. And I can't help but think that too was a part of Jesus' making.



I think of Joseph teaching Jesus how to pray. Taking him to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Going on pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem.

I picture them having conversations in the carpenter shop, where Joseph practiced his skills and passed them on. Running his roughened hands over a piece of wood, demonstrating how to use his tools, patiently educating Jesus – not only in the fabrication of furniture, but also in the *moulding and shaping of human lives*.



Carpenter workshop tools, Vienna, Austria. Photo by Jorge Royan, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vienna_-_Carpenter_workshop_tools_-_0027.jpg

None of this is to take away from Mary's influence, which I'm sure was quite profound. But simply to acknowledge that Joseph *also* had a part to play.





The Dream of St. Joseph,
by Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–1779)

Now you may think that’s a lot of speculation. But what I’m going to tell you next is *not*. Joseph had it all planned out, what to do with Mary. Until an angel appeared to him in a dream. And here is what transpired:

“Joseph, son of David” the angel said. Notice that *royal* reference. This angel is going to ask of Joseph something that will demand the highest of who he is. “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Now that is a big ask! A huge request! To believe that Mary’s pregnancy is not the result of some passionate indiscretion, but is instead the very work of God! Really? Would *you* believe it?

Doesn’t this stretch the bounds of all probability: To believe that God is present in this messy, scandalous, shame-filled situation? And that the right thing for Joseph to do is to go ahead with marriage? And take this child, and bring it up as if it was his very own?

Well. We *do* hear of such things, don’t we. So perhaps it’s not entirely beyond the range of what we’re willing to believe.



But then the angel goes and adds another line: “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Place yourself in that very moment. With an angel making such incredible claims. Sit down with Joseph when he wakes and tries to make sense of it. What will you do? Will you listen to this messenger? Will you act in faith, trusting that it is true? Will you play your part in the unfolding of such an amazing drama?

We know that Mary had to consent. God did nothing without her willing participation: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord;” she said. “Let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 2:38) But here we see that Joseph also had a decision to make. He too had a momentous choice that would affect the future of all humanity. When Joseph awakes from the dream, what will his answer be?



Joseph may be a small bit player, but he has a *crucial* role to play in a larger story. If Joseph will not say “yes,” the story cannot proceed as planned. Joseph’s participation is indispensable.

And what I’m getting at here – the thing I want you to consider this morning – is whether in some way, shape or form, *your* life too might be indispensable. That *you* might have some part to play – in a story-line designed by God and plotted out upon the earth. With all of us as potential participants.

We may not be front and centre. We don’t need to have a major role. All we have to do is fulfil our part of the story. We are called to live our own, often small and seemingly insignificant, lives with faithfulness and obedience to God.



I'm not saying you can't have a *great* part, maybe even a starring role in one chapter or another. A kind of Volodymyr Zelenskyy part. He was a comedian of all things. But now – miracle of miracles – he takes his place as a great leader of his people: Time Magazine's "Person of the Year."



I'm not saying you can't be that. It's just that *most* of us are called to lesser things. Oh, we may entertain visions of greatness, but somewhere along the way we realize that our calling will be less spectacular.

Like Joseph, our primary role in life may be simply to be there for others. To help *them* be the best people they can be.

We're here to help our partners, our spouses, our children, our sisters and brothers, our friends. Can we do that in the best possible way?

Can we lift up *another*? Make their life a better life, support them in their endeavours, help them when they're in trouble. Enable *them* to be the people God is calling them to be?

That's what Joseph did. He arrives on the scene, but quickly fades into the background, allowing others in his family to be the stars in God's holy drama.



This morning, I want you to think of those people God has given to your care. Take a moment and name them now, quietly in your heart.

What do they need from you? ... What is the very best gift that you could give them at this time? ... What is preventing you from saying "Yes," from giving your consent to God's calling?

God doesn't force us into these things. God waits patiently for our participation. "Here's what I need you to do Joseph. Don't be afraid ..."

Most of us are not called to starring roles. Most of us are just "ordinary Joes," so to speak, trying to do our best.



Here's something else for us to consider. Recently our congregation celebrated its 90th Anniversary. Over the years First Mennonite has played a leading role in our community. We've been at the centre of so much. We birthed several new congregations, while our own building was bursting at the seams with lots of people and programs and energy.

Part of us may long for those days to return. What if God has other things in mind? Over time our role may change, you know. Certainly that's true for us as individuals. Perhaps it's true for congregations as well.

Listen to this: That does not mean that God is finished with us. Or that we cannot live out our lives faithfully in a different way. I see our congregation, smaller in number perhaps, but still faithfully living in the family of God. Worshipping, praying, serving, often supporting ...

Some of us are meant to embrace the role of being Joseph. To live in our world with wisdom and kindness and courage. Without Joseph being a willing participant, the story cannot proceed as planned. *We all* do our own little part.



The poet, Emily Dickenson, wrote:
“If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.”²



Emily Dickenson,
ca. 1848

There’s no such thing as an “ordinary Joe.” Only amazing and faithful ones!
Thanks be to God!

² https://www.hrwestf.org/mobile_library/r2etoolkit/emily_dickenson.pdf, Accessed Dec. 17, 2022.