

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2016

“Love Is What You Do”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 7:10-16 ~ Matthew 1:18-25

Throughout Advent we await the birth of Jesus. We think about what it must have been like for Mary as she awaited that special birth. But seldom do we give much thought to Joseph. What we know about Joseph is that he was a carpenter, and that he was a stand-up guy. Legend has it he was a widower with several children when he contracted with Mary’s parents for her to be his next wife. God knows what he had been through in that journey ... to go through illness and loss and grief and single parenting until finally he was ready to begin again. All the while, day after day he got up early ... went to his shop ... worked a long, hard day ... and kept his family fed.

Nazareth was a dusty backwater town of low reputation way up north in Galilee, not the kind of place you would expect God to do great things, nor even much of anything. Joseph’s people came from Bethlehem, another dusty backwater town a few miles outside of Jerusalem. Every village needed its crafts people. The more gifted and the more ambitious artisans went to the city to make their fortune, winning special commissions from priests or Kings. Joseph was either not that ambitious or perhaps he was satisfied with the simple life of the small town where everybody knows your name and people take care of each other. But this small town was almost his undoing.

In the big city it would have been easier to keep secrets. In the big city he might have been able to hide the fact that his young bride-to-be was pregnant before the wedding had even taken place. But in a small town, everybody would know ... everybody would talk ... everybody would speculate ... while Joseph would know he was not the father of that child. Imagine his feelings.

In those days, you were considered married from the day the contract was set. Joseph would have talked to Mary’s parents first, then perhaps to Mary herself. Then he would have paid them a formal visit and brought a small gift for Mary to verify his intent. From that moment it was sealed, it was official, it was even *legal*. Mary would have been twelve to fourteen years old ... which always shocks me when I think about it ... and inexperienced in the ways of the world. It was customary for a girl to live with her parents for about a year after this formal betrothal before the wedding could take place, after which she moved in with her husband. During that year they would have no intimate contact. But from the moment of betrothal Mary was legally and morally Joseph’s wife. Were she intimate with any other, it would be considered adultery. Were Joseph to die, Mary would be considered his widow. She would inherit his estate, such as it was, and his children, even marry the next brother in Joseph’s family according to the ancient law of Levirate marriage. Were Joseph to decide to back out of the contract during for any reason during that year of betrothal, he would have to present her with a public letter of divorce.

I wonder who told him. Was it Mary herself, with her unbelievable story? “Yeah, that’s the ticket! I was visited by this angel of God!” Or did Mary’s parents come in person to break the news? Confused, uncomfortable, embarrassed, angry, afraid for the disgrace about to come on their family ... afraid for their daughter’s life because the penalty for adultery was death by stoning? Or did they just wait until Mary began to show and could keep the secret no longer so that Joseph had to confront her himself?

Imagine his predicament. As a tradesman in a small town, Joseph depended on his reputation for business. If he did nothing, people would assume he had broken the sacred tradition, offended Mary’s honor and that of her family, and fathered this child before they were properly married. Then he would have to raise this somebody-else’s-child ... be reminded every day of what Mary had done ... wonder every day who the child’s real father could be and when might he show up ... wonder if Mary was through with that man or not? No, letting the marriage proceed would poison all his relationships, leave him wondering about every man who entered his shop.

If he divorced Mary ... as was certainly his right ... people would assume that she had been unfaithful. She would be disgraced. Her family would be disgraced. The town would be offended. And he might just be signing Mary’s death warrant. But his honor had been offended. He had done nothing wrong. Mary was pregnant, and he was not the father. What a nightmare! After all he had been through, this just wasn’t what he had planned for his waning years. What should he do?

Before any angel appeared in his dreams ... *before* the town could erupt in outrage over fresh new scandal ... Joseph did the right thing. Matthew tells us that he was a righteous man, which can be dangerous thing at one level. People who are scrupulously righteous easily become proud, *self-righteous*, judgmental of others’ weakness, harsh with others’ mistakes, and jealous in guarding their own good name, afraid more than anything else that somebody might take advantage of them. Their righteousness can make them small, stingy, withered souls. But in the end righteousness isn’t just about following all the rules and having a good reputation. It’s about having a right heart, a big heart, a great heart. It’s about being merciful, compassionate, generous, and gracious. It’s about being filled with love for God and God’s love for every person. Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth in Galilee was righteous from the heart ... not just on the surface. He was not willing to have a girl killed and a family ruined for the sake of his wounded pride. So he decided to put Mary away as quietly as possible ... to tell people that it just didn’t work out, and let them think what they would. It was the righteous thing to do for everybody concerned. Truly, God picked a good man to be the Jesus’ foster father.

At this point God intervened. An angel spoke to Joseph in his dreams: “*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*” (Matt 1:20-21).

“*Do not be afraid!*” That’s what angels always say before they drop stupendous news on some poor, unexpected soul. I don’t know about you, but if anybody, let alone an angel from God, met me and the first thing out of his or her mouth was “Don’t be afraid,” my anxiety level would blow through the top of my head and I’d be very afraid. Somebody needs to give these angels a

basic lesson in human psychology. You don't prepare a person for shocking news by telling them "Fear not." You don't calm a person's nerves by commanding them, "Do not be afraid!" And Lord knows, Joseph already has enough to worry over before he dreams of an angel whose first words are "do not be afraid."

And what's up with that whole dream business, anyway? I know that Joseph was a religious man, devoted, close to God and all that, but did he have these angel dreams all the time? We know of two other times, later, when the angel warns Joseph to skedaddle down to Egypt because that tyrant Herod is about to kill all the little boys in Bethlehem and again when the angel tells him Herod has died and it's safe to go back home. And I know that other folks saw angels all over the place in the story of Jesus' birth. An angel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of his son John, who will be called "the Baptist." An angel appeared to Mary to announce she'll be the Messiah's mother. Even that rag tag bunch of shepherds out standing in their field were chosen by God to hear the news from a real, live angel and they got to see the entire heavenly host ... row upon row ... singing gloriously the very first Christmas Cantata ever, all about "Peace on earth." But Joseph didn't get to see any real, live angels. He just *dreamt* of angels in his sleep. And you know how dreams are. Even when they're so vivid and dramatic ... even when they're so authentic for the first few waking moments you aren't sure which reality you are in ... you wake up and shake it off. Joseph already had reason to be troubled. I imagine he had more than a few nights where it was hard to sleep at all ... and more than a few troubling dreams about his predicament. Now here was a dream of an angel from God telling him to change his opinion ... change his plans, and marry Mary after all. How did he know the dream was true? But he woke up ... and without asking for a clearer sign, a better deal, some divine guarantee, he risked it all ... he married the girl, and he obeyed the God of the dream.

Joseph only appears a few other times in the gospel stories, in all of the Bible, in fact. In Matthew he obeys the angel dreams to flee to Egypt and then to come back home (Matt 2:13-23). We have no record that he ever gets to meet the wise men. Luke has Joseph at the scene when the shepherds visit, but he doesn't do anything (Luke 2:16). Luke says that Joseph was amazed by what Simeon said about Jesus when they took the baby to the Temple to be dedicated, but he didn't say a mumbling word (Luke 2:23). In fact, in all the stories about him in the Bible, Joseph, descendant of David, carpenter from Nazareth, husband of Mary, foster father, earthly guardian, and protector of the Savior of the world, never says a blessed thing.

The last we hear of this quiet, decent man, is when Joseph and Mary make their annual trip down to Jerusalem, and discover on their way home they had accidentally left Jesus behind ... they search everywhere for him ... and are astonished to find their precocious twelve year old discussing theology with the teachers in the Temple. What would the simple man from backwater Nazareth have made of that? We'll never know, because as usual, Mary does the talking for both of them: "*Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety,*" and Jesus answers by relegating Joseph to his custodial role when he tells her "*Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*" (Luke 2:48,49). He might as well have said, "You ain't my daddy!" Then Jesus goes back home with them to Nazareth where he will finish growing up while Joseph fades into obscurity.

Here is an ordinary man, a quiet man, a carpenter, caught up in the grand purposes of God. He quietly obeyed. Though he could not possibly have comprehended all that God meant to do through these events, Joseph simply did what he was told.

The world has plenty of noisy Christians, and I suppose I am one of them. But we all know, it's not the talkers who get the essential work done. Joseph, the quiet man of the Bible, shows us that it's not the words we say, but the things we do that make the difference. You don't have to be a smooth talker or a sweet singer to be God's servant on earth. You need simply to be willing, when the God of surprising visitations and unexpected detours calls you in a new and risky direction, to say "yes." You need only be willing to do the righteous thing, the merciful, compassionate, loving thing, when the opportunity arises, and God's great work will be accomplished through you.

And Joseph shows us that in serving God ... love is what finally matters. Our culture has reduced love to a warm, fuzzy feeling of good will, but love is what you do and not just when you're feeling good. Love is what you do when you feel angry and frustrated and at your wits' end. Love is what you do when you're distracted by a thousand other things and interrupted. Love is what you do when *somebody* has to do what's necessary ... when *somebody* has to do the right thing, even though it's hard. Love is what you do as a habit of the heart because you have a great heart. This is the love that casts out fear because you know you can count on a person who loves you like that.

Quiet, simple, good Joseph, the town carpenter from Nazareth, the silent, stoic, senior, the straight man of the Christmas pageant shows us what love is and why it matters most. It isn't noisy. It doesn't focus on itself. It just does the right thing.

Where do you think that Joseph got that kind of love? I think he got it from God. I think he learned it from the God he studied and worshipped and obeyed and loved all his life. Because that's the way God loves us. Quietly, consistently, simply doing what needs to be done for us, again and again and again. And that's the story of Christmas. Not that God did one great thing for us once upon a time ... but that the great thing that God did for us once upon a time ... is the kind of thing God does for us all the time ... even in our time. Even in our time, even this year, the Christ will be born here in the midst of us this Christmas because we need him so much. And God will choose simple people to do God's great work because they will say "yes" when the "Fear Not" God of big dreams calls on them.

Thank God for the quiet, simple servants of God that God keeps sending us to get God's work done. Thank God for loving us so much through them. May we pray?

Loving God, grow our souls so we can be like Joseph. Make us generous and gracious and compassionate and merciful and kind and loving most of all. Discipline our hands to do your work on earth so that the people around us can be grateful to you for sending us into the world to do your work. Like Joseph, may we be remembered not for our words but for our deeds. Like Joseph, when people remember us, may they remember you more. For you are the faithful and loving Savior of us all. Amen.