

December 22, 2019 'What to do with Joseph?!' Rev. Jane Courtright
Matthew 1:18-25

As the title of my meditation asks: WHAT TO DO WITH JOSEPH??

Joseph has been a perennial problem!

But something MUST BE DONE with Joseph, after all:

He is part of the Christmas story.

He is ALWAYS on hand for the nativity scenes.

No church can do its annual CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

(as our children and others did last Sunday!)...

without finding a likely young man to play the role of Joseph.

The Old Reformed United Church of Christ in Philadelphia

was known for its annual Living Christmas Nativity Scene.

24 hours a day, for 2 weeks during the Christmas season,

live animals were present at the nativity scene.

on Christmas Eve, REAL PEOPLE completed the scene.

Geneva Butz, who was pastor at the church during that time,

tells a story about the year they had a 'STAND-IN JOSEPH.'

She says that on Christmas Eve, OLD FIRST MEMBERS

play the parts of the shepherds, magi and the holy family.

Usually, they have a very young baby who plays the part of Jesus.

Naturally, if possible, the baby's parents play Mary & Joseph.

But sometimes, for various reasons,

they only have a mother and baby present.

It's then that they have to look for a 'STAND-IN JOSEPH!'

One year, the baby's father, at the last minute, had to work.

The pastor looked into the crowd that had gathered

to see the nativity scene and noticed a bearded stranger.

So, she asked him, "How would you like to be Joseph tonight?"

Amazingly enough, he agreed, went inside to put on Joseph's robe, 2
then took his place beside Mary and the baby.

When the pageant was over, he took off the robe,
and before anyone could learn his real name, **HE DISAPPEARED!**
They didn't even get a chance to thank him.

Like that stranger who disappeared after the nativity scene,
the Biblical Joseph seems to disappear after the birth story!
We hear **little** of him again!

We do hear of Mary, the mother of Jesus –
She is at the wedding in **Cana** at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.
She is at the foot of the **cross** on the day of Jesus' death.
BUT WHERE IS JOSEPH?

We don't hear much about Joseph in the **CHURCH EITHER.**
Oh, there have been **LEGENDS** through the ages about Joseph.
One legend from the middle ages tells the story
of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem.

According to this legend, they passed a tree filled with cherries.
Mary asked Joseph to gather some for her.
When he refused,
the tree miraculously bent down & offered its fruit to Mary.
Whereupon Joseph fell to his knees
to ask forgiveness for his earlier refusal.

This story was later set to music in the Christmas Carol
named '**The Cherry Tree Carol.**'
If you have ever heard Peter, Paul & Mary's Christmas concert,
you enjoyed their special rendition of this carol!
Maybe hearing the words will help you to remember:

*O, then bespoke Mary,
with words so meek and mild,
"Pluck me one cherry, Joseph,
for I am with child."*

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*O, then bespoke Joseph,
with an answer most unkind,
"Let HIM pluck thee a cherry
that brought thee now with child!"*

The words of the carol have a quaint and bizarre sound
to our modern ears.

Yet, the carol does make Joseph seem more human,
allowing him to show some understandable anger.

But mostly, the song makes a contrast between
A VERY SWEET Mary & a **NOT TOO SMART, EMBARRASSING** JOSEPH.

But at least the song makes **MENTION** of Joseph!!

As I prepared the sermon and bulletin for this day,

I flipped through the Christmas songs of several church hymnals.

I did find one song in a children's hymnal.

Of course, I found many, many references to Mary, mother of Jesus,
but virtually **NO** references to Joseph!

The next hymn we will sing is a 15th century carol
included in the UCC New Century Hymnal.

Nonetheless, Joseph is **NOT** a bearded stranger
who disappears after the birth scene,
not just a 'stand-in' for a live nativity scene.

NOR is Joseph

An awkward, unkind, **NOT TOO SMART** man of little faith!

In fact, in Matthew's gospel,
Jesus plays a main role in the birth story.
Joseph, rather than Mary, is the **CENTRAL** figure!
What can **WE** learn from this story of Joseph?

In Matthew's account,
Joseph considered a quiet divorce from Mary
when he learned of her pregnancy.
But an angel appeared to him and told him
to go ahead and marry her,
for the child she awaited - was the work of the Holy Spirit.

NOT only that, but Joseph is to name the child,
taking legal responsibility for the baby in the eyes of society.
How **MATTER OF FACT** this account of Jesus' birth
reads more than *2,000 years later*.

"Now it happened like this..." the passage begins.

THAT'S IT?????!!!!

I imagine it wasn't **so simple** in real life!

Imagine for a moment, how Joseph would feel
when Mary told him she was pregnant-
that the baby was conceived with the Holy Spirit.
This would be a **HARD STORY** to swallow!

To really understand Joseph's dilemma,
the complexity & seriousness of the situation,
We have to understand the marriage customs of his time.
Marriage in Joseph's time was in practice
much different from **OUR** customs today
(which themselves are changing all the time!)

Marriage consisted of **2 basic steps**:

1. A couple became betrothed at an early age
(often while still children)
through an agreement usually made by their parents.
2. Years later, the 2nd step was taken,
with the bride going to live with the groom & his family.

Mary & Joseph were **BETWEEN** these **2 steps** of marriage
when Jesus was conceived.

You begin to see why this was such a dilemma for Joseph!
Just as he decided that to divorce quietly and quickly
would be the just and kind thing to do,
Joseph (in a dream) gets a message from God that changes his mind.
Just how he handles the situation helps us understand
the real strength of Joseph's character.

The message was that the baby **was** of the Holy Spirit,
AND would be a savior to his people.
Joseph wakes up and makes his decision:
He **WOULD** take Mary to be his wife!!!

How did Joseph feel about Jesus? The story doesn't say....
But it does tell us what he did.
And Joseph's commitment to Jesus
DOES NOT END with his decision to wed Mary.

Later, even after the baby is born,
Joseph pays attention to a warning in **YET ANOTHER** dream message!
He takes Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt to save Jesus
from King Herod's **slaughter** of the Hebrew children!

Joseph, the man we **SOMETIMES** don't know **WHAT** to do with,
turns out to play an **indispensable** role
in the Christmas story!

Some of us are **still** wondering about Jesus.
Many of us will **keep ON** wondering....
But some of us, **LIKE JOSEPH**,
will move beyond wondering
and will commit or recommit ourselves
to living with our Christ, the child, the adult...
the eternal Spirit....**central** in our lives.

Immanuel, God with us,
is trying in these weeks before Christmas,
to be **REBORN** in our hearts and lives.

The Advent season is a chance for a **new beginning!**

How you and **I RESPOND** to the **UNEXPECTED** makes a difference!
If, like Joseph, we leave room in our lives for surprises,
we might also someday meet an angel.

Advent is a time to remember that the angel unexpected
may bring a blessing in disguise;
that love **IS** more powerful than fear;
and that the **rebirth** of *hope*, *peace*, joy and *love*
REQUIRES our ASSISTANCE & PREPARATION!!

Amen.