



## Sermon

Matthew 1:18-25  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 23, 2007  
Historic St. George's UMC  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### St. Joseph the Ignored

Have you ever noticed in Christmas cards depicting the nativity how Mary gets front and center and Joseph is off to the side. If Joseph were missing from your crèche, if he got left down in the basement all rolled up in tissue paper, would you notice? Even if you do, no problem. Substitute a shepherd. Who's gonna know? Joseph is that non descript.

Much the same is true in the art, at least what I've seen. Joseph is pretty much in the background. He has a wondering or worried expression. He's a senior-citizen-looking guy. In renaissance art, Andre Mantegna's *Adoration of the Shepherds* for example, Joseph has dozed-off, his mouth wide open. If paintings had sound, you could hear the snoring.

Seems to me, most traditions give us Joseph as more Mr. Mary. The removed, reserved, quiet husband who supported Mary's Immaculate Conception winds up immaculately embarrassed.

Hear the term annunciation, and we think of the angel telling Mary she's in the family way. No artist ever painted Joseph's annunciation. Get out your sketch pad and draw this: a man bolting up in bed having the nightmare of his life, told by an angel his intended is pregnant and God's spirit did the deed. Make sure you draw plenty of sweaty rags all over the floor from mopping the cold sweat off his brow. Don't forget the mussed bed from all the tossing and turning after said angel says to marry Mary anyway.

Joseph is the forgotten player in the First Noel. Neglecting him is fairly understandable. Only Matthew (heard today) gives him any real notice. Luke mentions him in passing and Mark not at all. John says, "Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Joseph" – that's it. Is this any way to treat the man who told the rabbi what Jesus name would be?

The one who saved Jesus from Herod's henchmen and taught him a trade?

Friends, I'd like you to meet St. Joseph the Ignored.

We have by and large ignored him. When we do, we pass over quite a man. No bit player either. Thanks to Matthew we have some things ponder about the guardian of Jesus and devoted life partner of Mother Mary.

Have you ever felt between a rock and a hard place? Have you ever felt in the middle of something where you didn't belong? Meet your patron saint, Joseph – between dream and reality, between grace and law, between a promise made and the voice of God, between reputation and shame, between tradition and the future, between shoulda, coulda, and woulda. Welcome to the world of Joseph the fearful, Joseph the troubled, Joseph the disturbed. Joseph the ignored.

Not to mention Joseph the dreamer. This is one of the most important things about him. In the midst of all that's spinning out of control in his life, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. "Do not fear, Mary's pregnancy is conceived of God. You have a special responsibility to give a name to the one God is sending into the world. The promised Yeshua – your young wife's baby will be God's arrival on earth."

We all know the embarrassing circumstances. Mary and Joseph were engaged. Bound by a law, the best outcome they could hope for was shunning, at worst, death by stoning.

So, Joseph is in the middle, stuck between at two options. One: Give her what she's got coming. Exercise your legal right. The law makes it perfectly clear she has shamed you by her sin. She has reneged on the investment in your life together. She has

broken faith and covenant with you. The law is on your side. Press charges.

But Joseph has a second option. He thought of it before the angel and the dream. He thought it was a good, just, righteous solution. He would divorce her quietly. She could go off and have the baby, live out-of-the-way, unnoticed, with minimal disgrace. People will forget. No trial. No punishment. Let her and this whole mess just go away.

So Joseph works his way out of the middle and decides on a quiet parting of the way. But just as he settles on this course there comes the dream on angel wings. "Joseph, name the baby. Not Joseph Sr. But with a name from your own deep longing and your people's great voices of hope. Joseph, you plus your holy hoping and dreaming, divided by your fears will be the way for Emmanuel, "God with us."

Joseph woke up and remembered what the angel said. Lay down your fears for a while. Trust your dreams. Trust God's people, their hope, their voices. Trust the angel.

I wonder... Can we have such dreams? I'm talking about God-sent, angel-winged dreams that come to a person in the midst of struggling, wrestling, tossing and turning with cold sweats on sleepless nights. I'm talking about dreams to dispel the anxieties and negative predictions. I'm talking about dreams that reshape "doin the right thing" into doing what you know deep down you must do.

I'm talking about God-sent dreams that speak to us when we're all settled down in our kerchief's and caps, all settled-in for a long winter's nap. We're all tucked in. The loose ends are tied down, tidy, neat, clean and legal.

Can we have such dreams?

St. Joseph the Ignored would say "Oh yes! There are God-sent dreams." What little we know about Joseph's life speaks volumes of gospel even before Jesus says goo-goo. Trust your dreams and the great prophetic voices of your people. Mary may have said: "Lord, let it be to me according to your word." But Joseph *acts* on the revelation he receives. He does what the message from God commands in his dreams and highest hopes. He forgoes his rights and

entitlement, his patriarchal prerogative. Joseph takes Mary and the child growing inside her *as God gives her to him*.

St. Joseph the Ignored says listen for God in the ambiguities and struggles (don't turn tail and run). The child he is earthly father to and guardian for is after all named "God WITH us" – ambiguities, struggles and all. What better time for dreaming than uncertain times? What better time to listen for another voice? Joseph's overlooked faith hangs-in and hangs-on to the dream and the promise long enough for God and angels to have their way before Joseph, the handy carpenter, feels the need to hurry-up and fix things by himself.

A woman I know works in the world of public health. Jessica is a nurse with teens and pregnancies. She sees lots of young women great with child. She also sees the males in their lives demanding paternity tests before offering any provision, nurture, support and protection for mother or child. When Jessica thinks about Joseph from the perspective of her everyday world, the thing that makes him remarkable is how he stays and stays and stays when he doesn't have to; how it was *his* choice to stay or go; how Joseph stepped-up and stood by Mary and Jesus.

She told me about asking a young man in her program if he was changed since his baby was born. She says the young man pointed at his baby son and said: "That's me!" She didn't get what he meant until he went on. "My boy is just like me. He looks like me. He acts like me. I'm starting all over because of him and this time the story is going to be different."

Jessica says she realized in that moment that if we are all made in God's image it is because God sees in us a chance for creation to be born again. "When the young men I work with," she says, "like Joseph, embrace their children, they are saved – saved from drugs or crime or the problem that is at the root of all their problems – hopelessness. Just one little baby can change a man so much. Then he in turn can change a home, a community and even the world he lives in. He can become someone he only dreamed of."

I'm reminded quote of a quote about fathers: "When a child is born, a father is born. A

mother is born too. It's just that for her it is a more gradual process."

When Joseph woke up from his dream, he still had to wonder how this child he was to raise would be his, but knowing what he *HAD* to do. He would stand by Mary. He would not abandon her. He would raise "God with us" as his own. He would teach him a trade and the faith of his heart and his people.

Jessica would add – statistics tell us that children raised this way finish high school, don't go to jail, grow into good parents and become contributing members of the community.

So, St. Joseph the Ignored is really St. Joseph the faithful. But not in predictable, bland, goody-goody ways we so easily throw that word around the church. Joseph shows us faithfulness with tenacious staying power, faithfulness that sticks with things and people when they let you down, faithfulness that holds on to dreams and love when everything swirling in your life would hide God from your sight. Faithfulness is about trusting hope and promise when everything else in your life is shouting NO! Faithfulness is about holding on to what angels tell you and what you know deep down God wants you to do.

We get this from Joseph as much as we get this from anybody. I wonder if Jesus didn't to.

One of Christendom's most historic anthem's sings: "Ave Maria gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus" or "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." How about one for Joseph? How about an **Ave Joseph**?

Hail Joseph, full of faith. The Lord is with you too.

You steadfastly trusted your dreams as guided by the hand of God.

You moved beyond yourself refusing to be bound by everyone else's options for you.

Hail Joseph, full of faith. The Lord is with you too.

You were aware of angels, the voice stirring so deeply within,

so deep it can only be holy, so deep it can only be God.

Your life and your choices are your answer to the angels.

Hail Joseph, full of faith. The Lord is with you too.

You stand as sturdy as a barn, living with your doubts, not running from them.

Hard knocks of hurt, shame, disgrace and failure and all,

you will not abandon the one you are promised to, your beloved.

Hail Joseph, full of faith. The Lord is with you too.

You put your hands on Mary's round belly and felt the baby kick.

You gave the child a God-inspired name.

You hold him in your arms.

You taught him to work with his hands like you worked with yours.

You said "Yes!" when you could have said "NO!"

"Yes" to compassion and care over conventions and norms.

"Yes" to righteousness of the heart and spirit over laws and doctrines.

Hail, Joseph, full of faith. The Lord is with you too.

The tools of your trade,

boards sawed, hammered, nailed and joined a mob would later lift and use with anger, pride and fear

to crucify the dream you nurtured to bear God's gift to the world.

Let us, O Lord, not only hold the dear child whose birth we celebrate,

but be changed by the courageous, stayed, steady faith a father inspired in a son,

and follow in *their* way.

Hail Joseph, full of faith. The Lord is with you too.

Amen.

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