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 Text: Matt 1:18-25

St. Joseph: Waking Up to Grace

Introduction to Scripture

This Advent we've learned about the Jesse Tree, a representation of Jesus' genealogy traced to the Old Testament figure of Jesse. Last week, Bruce mentioned a key figure in the tree, King David, Jesse's son. Today we'll consider another key figure, Joseph, the husband of Mary. Yes, Jesus' genealogy is traced through Joseph (not Mary) in both the gospels that list his lineage. Joseph is understood to be Jesus' adoptive and legal father even though he is not his biological father.

We'll hear now the account of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Matthew, a version of the Christmas story that features Joseph prominently. Listen for God's Word.

Sermon

My first call was in St. Joseph, Missouri. Someone had tee-shirts printed up that said, "St. Joseph, Missouri—It's not the end of the earth, but you can see it from there." Actually, the town was quite prosperous around the turn of the 20th century but when I lived there the glory days were long gone. The town was established in 1843 by a French fur trader named Joseph Robidoux who named it for his patron saint. While I lived there, the ministerial association came up with the nifty idea of celebrating a city-wide "Saint Joseph's Day." After all, Joseph is the patron saint of families and workers. What could be a more fitting civic and religious theme than to affirm family and work life? We planned a lunch, a dinner, speakers, and other special events. The first year the turn-out was marginal. The next year, interest was so slight that we canceled everything. Unfortunately, on the calendar of saint days, Saint Joseph's day is March 19, eclipsed by two days by a much more popular saint. How can a family man who labored as a humble carpenter compete with a Celt who was kidnaped by pirates, sold into slavery, who, escaped, converted to Christianity, became a missionary, eluded arrest numerous times, and who, legend has it, raised the dead and drove all the snakes out of Ireland? Saint Joseph couldn't hold a candle to Saint Patrick!

Joseph in the popular imagination is a rather uninteresting figure. In the Bible, he appears only in the nativity stories and in one walk-on part when Jesus is twelve and his mother, who gets the speaking part, calls the boy on the carpet for not telling his parents where he was going. After this, Joseph drops off the face of the gospels and is never heard from again. This has led to the speculation that he died before Jesus reached manhood.

Joseph just doesn't get much respect. Look at your Christmas cards. Either it's a cameo of the Madonna and child, with Joseph not even in the picture, or he's a doddering old man leaning on a cane in the shadows. Or consider the familiar carols. Out of some forty in our

hymn book, I could find only two that mentioned Joseph.

Luke's telling of the nativity story dominates our traditions, a story where Mary is in the starring role. This morning we turn to Matthew's version. For Matthew, Joseph is no cardboard figure helping Mary on and off the donkey and hanging around in the background. He was every bit the leading man. He was surely *not* the feeble grandfather figure the Old Masters painted. Later in Matthew's gospel we glean that after Jesus there were at least six other childrenⁱ that Joseph fathered, provided for, and helped raise, hardly the job for a candidate for the nursing home.ⁱⁱ Joseph was a devout Jew, named for one of the Patriarchs. He was a descendent of King David whose family had historic connections with Bethlehem. He was a carpenterⁱⁱⁱ. And he was engaged to be married to a village girl named Mary. What happens next, according to Matthew's telling, makes Joseph a true saint.

But first, a word about first century Palestinian sociology. The custom was for a father to promise his daughter at puberty to her future husband. She would continue to live with her parents for about a year. But the betrothal was tantamount to marriage. During the engagement, the girl was called "wife." If her fiance should die before the consummation of the marriage, she became a widow and subject to the law of Levirate marriage. She could be dismissed from the relationship of betrothal only by a letter of divorce. If she consorted with other men, she was guilty not of fornication but of adultery. The penalty for adultery was death by stoning.^{iv}

So, when Joseph's fiancée Mary turned up pregnant, like any unplanned pregnancy (especially one out of wedlock), it messed up everything. It was a disgrace not only to Mary's family but a huge insult to Joseph's honor. If his betrothal to Mary were not purely an arranged marriage but involved love to any degree, Joseph would have been deeply hurt by what he would naturally have assumed was her betrayal.

What should he do? He was a good man, a righteous man, one who lived by the Torah. But he was also compassionate and didn't want to go by the letter of the law, publicly bringing charges of adultery which could lead to Mary's execution. Therefore, he planned to break off the engagement quietly.

Joseph was sleeping on this decision when, like his patriarchal namesake, he dreamed a crazy dream. In the dream, an angel from God delivered the shocking command to wed Mary. Further, the angel announced that Mary's pregnancy had nothing to do with another man, but was on account of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was to name the boy she would bear Jesus. To top it off, the angel made the outlandish claims that this son would save God's people from their sins and be called "Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."^v

If I had been Joseph I would have had a zillion questions. Like, could I trust this crazy dream to be divinely inspired and not just the result of ingesting a few rancid nuts or spoiled figs? Wasn't being compassionate and not having Mary stoned enough--did I really have to take the radical step of marrying her? Did I have the guts to buck social norms and risk ridicule? Could this child really be some mysterious union of my very human fiancée and the Lord God Almighty? Was I, Joseph, really to be an agent in God's scheme of saving his people from their sins?

As we hustle and bustle about in the final days before celebrating Christmas, we, too, face questions. This holiday we celebrate, isn't it just a good excuse for gathering together family and friends? Isn't all the gift-giving only a healthy exercise for our otherwise selfish nature and, not

to mention, necessary for the economy? Isn't Christmas just a good time to focus on the so-called magic of childhood? Isn't it just a socially agreed upon time to be charitable to the poor, to chip in a few bucks in the Salvation Army pots? And even the story of the baby and his peasant parents camped out in the barnyard—isn't that just a sentimental tale on par with made-for-t.v. movies featuring Frosty and Rudolf? In sum, isn't Christmas just a cultural phenomenon that's supposed to bring out the best in us and make us feel good?

Or, could it be that all the fruitcakes and eggnog, all the cedar boughs and sparkling lights, all the toys and bell-ringers, even all the plaster manger scenes and plastic stars of Bethlehem point to something a whole lot bigger? Could Christmas mean that the universe is open, not closed?

As modern folk we have come to assume that what you see is what you get. We have grown accustomed to a closed universe where everything has an explanation. We live in a world with no mystery and no grace. We live in world where folks get what they deserve, where if you get anywhere, it's because your own bootstraps are well-worn. We plan our own destiny and are masters of our own fate. We live in a world where two and two can only add up to four, no more, no less. We pride ourselves on being open-minded, but nothing could be further from the truth.

However, if we dare to contemplate that reality might be more than meets the eye, the crazy dream that St. Joseph had a couple of thousand years ago and the baby he named Jesus pry the lid off right off our universe. Christmas, if we are truly broad minded, allows for revelation. It signals that there is a God, and not one content to stay in his remote heaven. It means that God is not just some ideal, but is active, is involved, is here among us. It means that the one who created the human race loved us enough to climb into our skin and bones, to become one of us, to save us from ourselves, to show us what reality is really all about.

And what is reality all about?

I think we get a big clue in Joseph's dream. The angel said, "Marry the girl." Now a *legal* response would be having her stoned. *Chivalrous* would be divorcing her quietly. Nothing short of *grace* describes wedding her. Grace is what it's all about! Joseph was to go contrary to what a closed universe teaches. He was commanded to abandon his plans and do something illogical, even crazy. Instead of divorcing himself from what looked like a big mess, God asked Joseph to embrace and love and commit his life to this pregnant teen and her child. Joseph was to be gracious, just like God is gracious.

The most impressive house on Greenville Street in the little town of Abbeville, SC is just down the block from the Burk-Stark mansion where Jefferson Davis had his last meeting of his cabinet before fleeing to Georgia. It's occupied by a diminutive, elderly widow named Adelaide. She is from an old Abbeville family. When the rag tag group of youth from church came by to carol, Adelaide insisted we come inside. We surrounded the tree her gardener had erected in her 24-foot-high, two-story foyer and sang. Afterwards, Adelaide passed around a plate of cookies she had baked in preparation of our visit. When we got ready to leave, she turned to Devon, a kid who liked to hang out sometimes with our group. He was big for his age, awkward, and the only black kid in the bunch. Stooped by terrible osteoporosis, leaning on her cane, craning to look up, she asked in her refined Southern accent, "What's your name, young man?" He told her and she said, "I'm so glad you came, Devon." Then, to my utter surprise, she reached up and

hugged him, an elf embracing a bear. I don't know whose smile beamed brighter-- Devon's or Adelaide's. The words we had just sung, "He rules the world with truth and grace," still ring in my ears.

This baby whom Joseph named Jesus grew up to embody grace. He risked his good name, his "moral integrity," if you will, to be with and for the undeserving and unworthy. Street walkers, political revolutionaries, dishonest businessmen, traitors, half-breeds--social outcasts of every stripe flocked to him. He was a friend of sinners.

Further, Jesus went around telling crazy stories about grace and saying that this is how God's universe, how Reality (with a capital R), works. He told of a father who greeted his long-lost ne'er-do-well son who returned home not with punishment and a lecture, but with a party. He told of an employer who paid the Johnny-come-lately workers the same as those who slaved all day. Turn the other cheek, he said. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. The old way of seeing things--tit for tat, you get what you deserve, watch out for number one--these rules of a closed universe don't work.

Jesus through his example and teaching showed us that God is not some heavenly banker sending out overdrawn notices or, worse, a disinterested force that set the world in motion and never looked back. Rather, God is a God who interrupts our sleep with crazy dreams, who knocks at the door of our hearts with unconditional love, who comes into this world as one of us, a naked, drooling baby. The universe is indeed open, and grace is not only possible but real.

Folks, Joseph got it! I can picture him sitting up in bed with a start, reaching for the phone, booking the wedding hall, ordering a tuxedo, and showing up on Mary's doorstep with a bouquet of flowers. Matthew says simply, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife."^{vi}

This Christmas, wake up to grace!

i. Matt. 13:55-56

ii. Incidentally, the Old Masters' paintings with Mary, young and attractive, and Joseph, an old man with a white beard, reflect the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, a doctrine which the Protestant Church later rejected.

iii. Matt. 13:55, Mk. 6:3

iv. Deut. 22:13-21

v. Okay, the exegesis is a bit sloppy here. The verse from Isaiah was Matthew's commentary, not spoken by the angel.

vi. Matt. 1:24