

Maybe you already have or soon will be putting away the Christmas decorations.

This morning I want to call your attention to one of the characters that stands tall in every nativity scene, but is often relegated to the back, almost forgotten.

And that is Joseph.

I confess I have a personal affinity for Joseph.

Growing up I was the ‘tall boy’ and was always cast as Joseph.

Never did I get to wear the finery of the Wise Men, crowns and pretty silky robes and carrying the gifts.

I had my father’s threadbare cotton bathrobe and was told to look solemn. (That’s a tall order for a 10-year-old!)

Now there are great men in the Bible who have much more written about them than these few verses which speak of Joseph.

Who can forget Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; Moses, David, and Solomon?

Scripture refers to them as heroes of the faith as they show what it is to walk faithfully with God as they faced challenges along the way.

So, what I am going to say may seem to be a very audacious statement: *Next to Jesus, the greatest man who ever lived was not one of those heroes, but was Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth, husband of Mary, appointed earthly father of Jesus.*

Let me tell you why I believe that.

Joseph, like the others, was given challenges, and how he met those challenges is a story we should never forget.

There was the challenge of disgrace.

Joseph’s family all agreed she was such a fine woman when he signed the engagement agreement with Mary. But now, pregnant?

“How could I have been so wrong about her? How could you do this to me, Mary?” Joseph tortures himself, as we all do when those we love act so contrary to what we love about them.

And to his angry demands of “why? why?” Mary only antagonizes him with a simple, “Trust me.”

Joseph’s family is crushed in disgrace. And his friends and neighbors – you can tell who your friends are when disgrace hits.

Long days, sleepless nights, and then Joseph decides for a private divorce – no public ridicule for the one he loves.

He finally sleeps. And only then does God’s will in this challenge of disgrace come clear: “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...” the angel says.

Can Joseph do it? Can you or I do what God wants us to do even when it means ridicule from friends or family?

The Scripture is magnificent in its simplicity: “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”

The cost of courage is in every step of a faithful walk with God. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Moses, David, Solomon had to pay. And Joseph, too, knows the cost.

You see, God’s will is so often not in the crowd pleasing, family pleasing sort of thing to do, but more often than not in the hard-to-understand, crowd-displeasing thing God wants us to do.

How about you? How many difficult choices have you had to make all alone, maybe in the face of hostility, of family and friends who did not understand?

It comes with being a parent, loving someone enough to face all the challenges and live through the loneliness when others believe the worst about you rather than the gospel truth.

Joseph meets the challenge of disgrace, but just when Joseph craves security for his family, there is the challenge of disruption.

The trip to Bethlehem for the census could not have come at a worse time. Mary is pregnant, soon to deliver her baby.

It's easy to imagine Joseph thinking, "It looks like the Lord who got us into this 'favored' position would make things a bit easier!"

But Joseph takes Mary and goes to Bethlehem. The kind shepherds and generous strangers from the East come. Life seems to be settling down for Mary, Joseph, and their newborn son, Jesus.

Matthew writes that they are in a house. Maybe this was God's way of being good to them, staying in Bethlehem, avoiding the disgrace of family and friends back in Nazareth, and Joseph can always find work as a carpenter.

Then, another dream, and another command from the angel: leave Bethlehem, go to Egypt, run from Herod who wants to kill Jesus.

Life is disrupted again. But there seems to be no hesitation, no begging God for an easier way, "Why don't you strike Herod dead and let us stay here?"

As before, the Scripture is magnificent in its simplicity, "He rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt."

They have to start all over, a strange country, no family support, what kind of work, what kind of pay can this immigrant find in Egypt? But he stays until God tells him he can leave.

They return to Nazareth. His family grows with children of his own. But he doesn't see his children grow up.

Perhaps it was the stress and strain of those disruptive early years of his marriage that hastened Joseph's death before Jesus was thirty years old.

The cost of obedience is in every step of a faithful walk with God. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had to pay; so did Moses, David, Solomon. And Joseph, too, knows the cost.

You see, God's will so often is not in the "easy way out" kind of life, but more often than not in the uncertainty and bewilderment of living God's way when the plans we've made don't work out.

How about you? How many difficult choices have you had to make in the ups and downs of life, when your plans have been turned upside down, inside out, and you are living as a stranger in a strange world?

Look again at Joseph. He was loving when challenged by disgrace and loyal when challenged by disruption.

Surely, you would think such a man who successfully met such challenges would be remembered, stories told about him the same way stories were told of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Moses, David, Solomon.

But we know so little of Joseph. Luke has a lot about Mary, a little about Joseph; Mark and John have nothing.

The only later Scripture reference is a question about Jesus from the crowds, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" An implication that to his neighbors, there was nothing special about Joseph.

He ran the shop on the corner, a good carpenter, an honest businessman, good father, nothing else.

The Bible is almost silent about Joseph.

So, it's easy to understand why Joseph is an almost-forgotten father. But there is someone who never forgot Joseph.

We know this because of the eternal tribute to Joseph: Jesus calls God, "Abba", the intimate term for 'daddy.'

And Jesus has no other person to learn about a daddy, except from Joseph, his appointed earthly father.

Jesus' greatest tribute to Joseph was to choose 'fatherhood' as one description of God's relation to us.

Two of Jesus' statements about God show what the fatherhood of Joseph meant to Jesus in his early years.

"God," Jesus said, "is one who is able to give good gifts...An earthly father would never give his child a rock if he asked for bread."

Joseph must have been a loving father for Jesus to have a picture like that.

And in his parables, like the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus pictures a father who loves a son with a love that is undeserved, unending, rejoicing, even when the worst has been done.

That kind of love is the kind taught by what a father does, day in and day out, of how he loves his children, something you never forget.

The statistics seem to say that too many fathers have almost forgotten their responsibilities for faith and their family.

Thank God, though, for this almost forgotten father who did not forget! Next time you set up your nativity scene, maybe move him a little bit closer to the front.

There is Joseph, a man who obeyed God in the face of so many challenges, a man almost forgotten, except by the son he loved, a man whom Jesus called 'daddy.'

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.