



HOLLYWOOD
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Fourth Sunday of Advent: "Joseph: The Amazing Technicolor Father"

December 18, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Matthew 1: 18-25

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday of the first season of the Christian year. It's also the last sermon of our Advent sermon series, *O Come All ye Faithful*, in which we have been intentional in preparing our hearts and souls for the birth of the Christ Child. We've taken the four themes of Advent – hope, peace, joy and love – and matched them with four Biblical persons whose faithfulness helped bring forth the Christ Child. We began with the prophet Isaiah, who foretold hope in the coming of the Messiah, and the kingdom of God. Our ministerial candidate Bridie Roberts preached about the radical ministry of John the Baptist, and how we are called like John to prepare the way of the Lord, fundamentally a way of peace. Last Sunday our wonderful Rev. Dave preached from the Gospel of Luke about Mary, her song and her joy as the mother of Jesus proclaimed what God's son will do for humanity.

We close our series this morning by focusing on the story of Joseph, who is mostly considered a supporting cast member in the nativity story, but whose story is really one of love. It was because of Joseph's love for Mary and love for God that the world was changed by the birth of the Christ child.

Now of the four Gospels, neither Mark nor John tells us about the physical birth of Jesus at all. Luke tells us the story of Mary, but it is only Matthew who tells us the story of Joseph. We tend to mush up the two stories in our telling of the Christmas narrative, since the stories of Mary and Joseph are really two sides of the same coin.

We know a lot about Mary, her cousin Elizabeth, and that she came from the town of Nazareth. What do we know about Joseph? Not much at all. We know he was from Bethlehem, that he came from a family of carpenters, and that Jesus never mentioned him by name. In fact, after Jesus entered the temple at age 12, Joseph is never mentioned again.

Now because Mary and Joseph were from two different towns, about 65 miles apart, we can deduce that their marriage had been arranged. We know in that day that girls as young as 12 or 13 were betrothed as soon as they were able to bear children, and boys were betrothed as soon as they had learned a trade from their fathers that would enable them to support a family.

We don't know how old Joseph was – just as Dave told us last week about the differing view of Mary that Catholics and Protestants have, so too are there ecumenical differences on Joseph's age. Protestants tend to think Joseph was likely a teenager who had apprenticed as a carpenter with his father and was ready to support a family.

Catholics believe that Joseph was an older man, likely a widower, because that would then explain how Jesus would have had brothers and sisters.

No matter Joseph's age, we can be reasonably sure that his family had arranged his marriage to Mary with her family, and that they had a long-distance relationship between Nazareth and Bethlehem during their one year engagement, or betrothal, before the actual wedding.¹

All that said, we also know that this was not just any arranged marriage. Joseph loved Mary. He loved her with all his heart. How do we know this? During one of their "date nights," when Joseph had made the trek to Nazareth to see Mary, she told him that she had been visited by the angel Gabriel, she was pregnant not by another man, but by the Holy Spirit and that her son was the messiah they had been waiting for.

Now, just imagine your beloved, who lives a day's journey away, telling you that she – is pregnant. Can you just imagine how devastated Joseph must feel? How deep must be his feelings of betrayal by the person he loves most? Think of how his entire world, the life he had been planning on with Mary, has been utterly shattered with just a few words?

There are those among us who have experienced that depth of anguish and betrayal at differing points in our lives. And when we find ourselves in that depth of despair, in those dark nights of the soul, there seem to be no good options. Joseph knew that if he flat out divorced Mary, she – and the presumably human father of her child – would be subject to the law, which meant they would both be stoned to death. But Joseph also knew that he couldn't live with a spouse who had betrayed him, nor raise another's child as his own. So, Matthew tells us, because Joseph was a good man, a righteous man who loved Mary, his plan was to have her "put away quietly," so that he could remove himself from Mary's life and the child could be raised by Mary and her family.

For Joseph, it came down to this: The Law said, "Stone her." Love said, "Protect her." And even with a broken heart, Joseph had compassion and mercy for this woman he adored.

Before he took any action, Joseph decided to sleep on it. And you know what happens to folks in the Bible who fall asleep. To quote Shakespeare out of context, here's what happens: *to sleep, perchance to dream.*

Dreams are used as a device throughout Scriptures for God to reveal God's own self to us. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there's a story of another Joseph, who lived more than a thousand years before Jesus.

As a young man THAT Joseph has at times been portrayed by Donny Osmond, among others. THAT Joseph had been given an amazing Technicolor dream coat by his father Jacob, causing his brothers to be so jealous that they sold him into slavery and told their father he was dead.

As an adult, THAT Joseph was a survivor. Cast into prison, he began to impress his fellow prisoners by his ability to interpret their dreams. When the Pharaoh began to have unexplainable dreams, and he heard of Joseph's talents, he called Joseph to interpret what God was trying to say to him. Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph that he made him second in command throughout Egypt because of his interpretations and his prophecies from God.

The Joseph we find in the nativity story understood that his dreams were signs from God, without need for interpretation. In the story of Jesus' birth, there are five dreams total –four by Joseph. In his first dream, in which an angel appeared to him and said those familiar and comforting words:

“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.”

Through dreams – their own and those of others -- both Josephs -- the son of Jacob, and the father of Jesus – understood God's call on their lives. Both were led into Egypt to protect their families, even though when they went they had no idea why. They simply trusted in God to guide them. And, both Josephs were considered to be righteous, faithful, holy men.

One had that amazing Technicolor dreamcoat.

The other we can consider an amazing Technicolor father in his own right. *Joseph, not having all of the evidence and knowledge of the future, decided to do more than law and custom required. He elected to do more than was expected of him. He let justice and compassion guide his decision about his pregnant betrothed. He was pulled, not by the strength of custom, but by the law of love.*²

In other words, Joseph trusted God enough, and loved Mary enough, to risk being scorned and derided by society and his own family so that he could continue his relationship with Mary, and respond affirmatively to God.

Len Sweet puts it this way:

Joseph's dedication to Mary was so complete that when he traveled to Bethlehem for the ordered census - as recorded in Luke's Gospel - he took her along. She was his family now, no matter what her condition or how her pregnancy had come about.

*We see Joseph foolishly dragging a very pregnant Mary out on a long, hard trip. Instead we should see a man who had so welcomed the Holy Spirit into his life that he took the pregnant Mary for his wife without any reservations or revenge. She was so thoroughly his wife that he did not dream of leaving her name off the official Roman roll-call being taken. He brought her, with a pregnancy too advanced for the amount of time they had been formally married, right into the middle of all his relatives during this Roman-forced family reunion.*³

The question for us this week, as we continue to prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of the Christ child, is how is God calling us to trust, to risk, and to follow him in new ways? How is God nudging us to be more like Joseph and make love the dominant force in our lives? If we are willing to say yes Lord, as did Mary and Joseph alike, our lives and our world would be forever changed – because we would not be trying to make Christmas fit into our lives, our constructs; instead we would be opening ourselves to God's plan for us.

The great poet W.H. Auden talks about this, in his *Christmas Oratorio: For the Time Being*, written during WW2. Auden in part comments that we humans just don't understand the power of God, and the magnitude of God's love and grace. Instead we want to tame God into being the God that suits us, that doesn't challenge us; for the time being. One of the characters in the poem says:

O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully.

Leave thy heavens and come down to our earth of waterclocks and hedges. Become our Uncle. Look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Willy with his homework, introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves.

That's not at all what Joseph expected of Emmanuel – God with us. Joseph not only allowed God to enter his life, but to change it completely.

And that's what the birth of Jesus, the Christ, should do for us. To change us completely. To transform us from people who have walked in darkness, but who now see a great light and want to share the good news with others. To be reminders to one other of Emmanuel -- that God is always with us, urging us forward – during good times and bad -- as we build the beloved community here on earth even as it is in heaven.

In closing, hear these words from St. John of the Cross, from the 16th century:
Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be a better light, and safer than a known way. In the evening, we will be judged on love.

We might not know much about Joseph, but we do know he put his hand in the hand of God. And then he put his hand in the hand of Mary, and of Jesus. And the result? It was love.

Merry Christmas.

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¹ With thanks to Adam Hamilton for inspiring this section. Hamilton, *The Journey to Bethlehem: Joseph of Bethlehem*, sermon preached at Church of the Resurrection, December 5, 2010. www.cor.org

² www.christianglobe.com

³ Leonard Sweet, *Welcome Home, Joseph*, sermon archives www.christianglobe.com, http://www.esermons.com/theResultsPage.asp?user_id=6740