

“WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM JOSEPH?”

Matthew 1:18-25

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The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

There are biblical characters who lodge themselves firmly in your mind from the moment of their introduction: Isaiah with the poetry of his prose, Jonah and his sulking, little Zaccheus climbing a tree to see Jesus, Amos and his fiery rhetoric. Others, for most of us, come to life more slowly, their significance muted, their presence almost unnoticed until something happens.

Joseph falls in the second category for me. For much of my life, I saw him as one of the fixtures in the Christmas manger, like the ox and the ass, and the birds nesting in the rafters. The church for centuries went out of its way to shine the spotlight solely on Mary, the young virgin who bore God’s child for us. And Joseph was the guy painted usually in the deep shadows of the nativity scene: there but not really there, part of the story but of little significance.

I never questioned any of this until as a college student, on a summer trip, I was walking one of the long corridors of the Louvre museum in Paris—barely looking at the overwhelming display of Renaissance paintings on religious themes—and there on the wall between the beheading of John the Baptist and the adoration of Simeon hung a small canvass, a portrait of a very young man looking down at the child in his arms rapt in wonder. I peered closer. “Joseph”—artist unknown.

In those days, I was not much into theology, so it didn’t occur to me then that the artist’s anonymity was probably no accident. His image of Joseph as a young man constituted no less than blasphemy. Young men, as we all know, tend to be long on hormones and hubris, and short on wisdom. In the tradition of the church, to underline the theology of the virgin birth, Joseph is always pictured as an old man—a very, very, very old man—one who could not possibly have had, you know—sex—with Mary.

Years went by, ordination, a parade of children’s Christmas pageants until a Sunday when the text was this morning’s scripture—Matthew’s matter-of-fact version of the Christmas story: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place this way....” And for the first time, I started thinking, really thinking, about Joseph. And the picture before my eyes was that old “artist unknown” portrait of a teen-aged boy, baby in his arms, love in his eyes.

Think of what that love required of Joseph. Months before this country boy from the Galilean hills searched high and low in Bethlehem for a place where Mary could give birth and then stayed to render assistance, before he took his wife and new baby and fled to a far country for years we are told in order to keep them safe, before this extraordinary young man did any of these difficult things, he had to do the harder thing. He had to believe that this child was the Son of God, conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. He had to trust Mary. He had to trust God.

That’s a lot of trust. And saying those words aloud—“that’s a lot of trust”—it seems like such a ridiculous understatement. Think of the problems *we* have trying to wrap our faith around the virgin birth. Now think of what was required of Joseph. He knew that by the wisdom of the world, he was a credulous fool for having such faith in his beloved, for believing in this kind of

divine possibility. It was absurd. He was absurd. And yet he stood fast. Despite the doubt that must have been the constant companion of his mind, he acted from the love and faith of his heart. He stood fast. He didn't waver. He became husband and he became father. He enfolded Mary and the babe in his strong protective embrace, and whatever the turmoil of his thoughts, his actions were the actions of faithfulness.

Forget the beautiful Christmas star. Forget the angel choirs, and the shepherds and the kings. Forget even the joyful obedience of Mary and the baby in the manger. Joseph is the heart of the Christmas story. We should, every year, pull him out of the shadows, look at him, and be amazed. We should look at him and be filled with wonder. We should look at Joseph and be terrified.

For years, as part of Bible study, I have told my fellow students that we should always place ourselves in the text. Who are we supposed to be in any story that we read? It is with both great trepidation and great certainty that I tell you that in the story of Christ's nativity, we are supposed to be Joseph. The level of credulous, naïve, foolish faithfulness that God demanded of Joseph is what God wants from us as well. There is a through line that runs straight from Joseph's decision to claim Mary and the baby as his own to Mary Magdalene, three days after the crucifixion, throwing open the door of an upper chamber and breathlessly proclaiming, "I have seen the Lord!" Both stories are ridiculous, utterly indefensible by any standard of human wisdom. Both stories define for us the faith in action required to call ourselves by the name "Christian."

Like most of you here, I have come to love the Christmas story. Every year, it stirs my heart and warms my soul. But we do a disservice to ourselves and to God when we sentimentalize this literally incredible story, when we cast a warm glow of lamp light over the dirty stable, forget the hardness of choices made, the fear and pain of childbirth, and the amazing faith and love of two "ordinary" teenagers, the courage they had to summon day after day to bear the Christ. This story, this unbelievably beautiful hard story, calls us not just to come and kneel before the manger on Christmas night and then go on our way, but to dare to take Joseph's steadfast presence as our model: to believe that God can act in extraordinary ways, to believe in the angels' message of peace of earth and good will to all, and hardest of all, to believe that when we say "yes" to God's utterly unreasonable expectation of us, and choose love and faith over all else, even the course of the world could change. I know. It's foolish even to consider. Thanks be to God. Amen.