

Characters at the Crèche: Joseph – The Silent One

Matthew 2:1-11

Second Sunday in Advent/9th December 2007

Christmas pageants are really amazing in the church's life. We've been putting them on since the Middle Ages. Tonight, we will offer yet one more rendering of this amazing story. It's always a joy for me to observe parents as they watch their child playing the role of Mary or Joseph, maybe a shepherd, or Magi. Perhaps you can remember getting dressed up as a child, yourself participating in the pageant. I remember being a shepherd, I think, never a Magi, never such a prominent role as Joseph. I once had a lead role in a David and Goliath play. I was asked to play David, which thrilled me because I got to defeat Goliath, and because, truth be told, I really didn't like the guy who played Goliath. I'm not proud of this, but it's the truth. However, I was never Joseph – perhaps the ultimate role for a guy in the Christmas play.

Despite the popularity of Christmas pageants, there's one slight problem. They tend to merge Matthew's and Luke's birth narratives into one story, which was never their intention. They are very different. We lose their distinctive voice when we combine them or choose to emphasize one account over the other. Matthew describes his Christmas pageant with only thirty-one verses. It takes Luke 132 verses to tell his story. For example, last week we looked at the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary and focused upon the prominent role Mary plays in Luke's gospel. From Luke's perspective, Mary is the protagonist in his Christmas pageant. Joseph doesn't say a word. Luke refers to Mary eleven times and to Joseph only three. However, in Matthew's Christmas pageant, Joseph has the lead role. Matthew mentions Joseph eleven times, Mary only three times. In Matthew, Joseph receives the revelation from God; he received the annunciation, not Mary. Mary doesn't say a word. She's the silent one. And yet, throughout the ages, there is a tendency to favor *Luke's* view of Joseph, to picture him as mute, on the edge, a marginal figure, standing there, playing his odd role, of "playing" father, but not really the father.

But what if we emphasized Matthew's story and gave Joseph a more prominent role, what exactly would that look like? Who *is* Joseph? The first seventeen verses of Matthew contain his genealogy leading up to Jesus (Luke's genealogy comes after his birth narrative). Thirty-nine times in Matthew's genealogy, Matthew's "drum roll of paternity," building, leading up to the birth of Jesus, thirty-nine times a man fathers a son – thirty-nine "begats." And just as we approach Joseph's turn finally to begat, to

express his masculinity, it all comes to a screeching halt.¹ What Joseph has to offer is not needed. He's "the father who is not the father." How do you think Joseph felt? What about Joseph? Some sympathy for Joseph!

We have carols to Mary, the shepherds, and the Magi; carols for the sheep, the cattle, and the birds; carols for the snow, carols to the silence of the night, even a song for the bloomin' drummer boy (!), but where's the hymn to Joseph? Who will compose the great tribute to Joseph? Maybe, Greg Knauf will do it – maybe this is your calling, Greg! This will be difficult because we don't know much about Joseph. He's of the house of David, probably born and bred in Bethlehem. As for his family identity, even the gospels disagree. In Matthew's genealogy, Joseph's father was named Jacob; according to Luke, his name was Heli. We're not even sure what line of work he was in. Tradition has it he was a carpenter, because Jesus is described as the carpenter's son (Matthew 13:54-55). But the word can mean a skilled craftsman in any hard material, wood, stone, or metal. The images of Jesus working at his father's side in the wood shop are all apocryphal, however, stories that come much later.² It's not surprising that the Roman Catholic Church declared Joseph the patron saint of workers.

Tradition has it that Joseph was actually an old man and perhaps a widower, previously married. This might explain why he's not in the picture throughout Jesus' ministry. When did he die? We don't know. Where is he buried? We don't know. His history is silent. In a recent book, two New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Crossan suggest that Joseph might have died near Nazareth during one of the many incursions by the Romans through the Galilee to squelch any Jewish resistance. There was a particularly brutal episode near Nazareth around the time of Jesus' birth, in response to Herod's death in 4 B.C. It would probably have been the pivotal event of Jesus' childhood that everyone would have remembered. If so, did that inform Jesus' calling to serve the Kingdom of *God* in sharp contrast to the Kingdom of Caesar?³

So, why do we prefer Luke's story with its emphasis upon Mary? Maybe because in a society largely patriarchal, it's important to lift up the feminine presence in the life of God, which we know was important for Luke. *Except this imbalance leaves us without a positive role model in Joseph.* In the nativity plays of the Middle Ages, Joseph is often shown asleep, indifferent. He becomes a comical figure, a messy dresser, helpless.

¹ Observation of James E. Dittes in *The Male Predicament: On Being a Man Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 14.

² See the fifth century Apocryphal text, *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, probably written in Egypt.

³ Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* (HarperOne, 2007), 76-78.

In the Medieval mystery plays, he's a comical figure, amiable but incapable. Only after the fifteenth century does Joseph get a new image, primarily in reaction to the rising devotion to Mary, which was leaving Joseph stranded, pushed to the sidelines.

Have you noticed that there are very few paintings, for example, of Joseph holding Jesus, of him being compassionate, of him actually having feelings? We have plenty of images of the Madonna and child. There's no Michelangelo (1475-1564) *Pietà* of Joseph, no opportunity to imagine him mourning the death of his adopted son, no rendering of Joseph suffering at the loss of his son, no tears, no emotion. *I wonder if our understanding of masculinity, even what it means to be a father would have been different if we had a better image of or better association with Joseph.*

This is a huge issue in our wider society, filled with absent fathers or men who are present but emotionally unavailable; men who are wounded and hurting and silently struggling with depression, but wish to appear strong, men who want to be present, who want to feel and connect with all the passion and power within, but for many reasons are unable to, cut off from the power within, confused about their role in the family or the church or the world. This is also a huge issue for men who want to be part of a religious community, but struggle, either consciously or unconsciously, with the church because it can be perceived to be a feminine institution. In such a setting men don't know what to do with male power and passion. Women have probably always outnumbered men in the church. I wonder if our preference for Luke's story has contributed to this. How can men who cannot connect with themselves seek to connect with God or others in God's family? It raises the important question, *what is a masculine expression of faithfulness?*

James Dittes, professor of pastoral theology and psychology at Yale Divinity School, movingly tells how his developing self-perception of being a man was seriously hindered by being Joseph in his church's Christmas pageant at age thirteen. He was all excited about being picked over the other boys for this "big part, important role, top billing, right there at the center of it all next to Mary." Miss Gardener and Miss Swearer wrote the script and directed the production. "Learning to be Joseph for [them], I was learning to be a man for them," he writes. Once recruited and on stage, Dittes remembers, his instructions were simple and absolute: *DON'T MOVE!* There he stood, "eyes down, one hand benignly on Mary's shoulder, the other hand out in open receptive gesture, welcoming all the pilgrims, I was to freeze, stock-still, the only person in the pageant unmoving and unmoved, the lead role become part of the scenery. I was the centerpiece, even the altarpiece of all the action, yet totally removed from the action, denied action, a figurehead. Presiding, in charge but uncharged, steadfastly going through the motions without a muscle. I stuck it out as manfully as Joseph did, the

father who was not the father.” This frozen power of Joseph, as he explains it, speaks for many men and fathers in our time: bound, rigid, stuck. Just stand there. Don’t move. Freeze.⁴

Years later, Dittes reflects, “What if I took Miss Gardener and Miss Swearer literally when they said ‘Be the hero.’ Suppose I [played] Joseph as I conceived him: concerned husband, tender father, generous host, thoughtful sage. I might have fussed about the manger, urged Mary to take a nap while I kept the vigil, graciously received visitors and their gifts with flourish and speeches. Suppose I had moved into the role and about the stage with such vigor? Suppose I had played Joseph as I thought I had been invited to? Suppose I had played Joseph as I most wanted to? Supposed I had played Joseph in the way that felt most authentic?”⁵ But that was not the script given to him. Only many years later did he discover the Joseph he wanted to be.⁶

The Joseph in Matthew’s gospel is not powerless and he’s not frozen. Pay attention to what’s in the text. Joseph is not powerless and he’s not frozen. Yes, he has to make sacrifices; he has a responsibility toward Mary. He is duty-bound. As a righteous man he sought to do the right thing. He tried to dismiss her quietly, instead of having her stoned. But he’s not only duty-bound. Joseph is a man who is in touch with the deepest parts of his psyche; he’s paying attention to his dreams. He’s not afraid to listen to God in the deepest recesses of his soul. There he hears what God wants from him, discovers his true purpose and role in life, and discerns the holy work God has in mind for him. *His full masculinity is brought into his relationship, his connection with himself and with God.* And when he awakes we see not frozen power, but *power enacted*, flowing, using his power, giving himself – not unlike Mary, but in his own unique way – *as a man* to do what only he can do; setting aside his dreams and his honor, *he gave his life to something infinitely larger than himself*; he willingly listened to God and placed his life in service to God’s mission to redeem the world.

There will be other times for begetting – in the meantime, there’s a job to do. From the opening chapters of the New Testament, this is what we learn: *self-fulfillment is found in self-abandonment.*⁷ That’s the source of life-giving power! “Whoever would save his life must lose it” (Matthew 16:25). Or, as Matthew said, “When Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son.

⁴ See Dittes, 3ff, a brilliant analysis in a chapter entitled, “Joseph: Frozen Power.”

⁵ Dittes, 4-5.

⁶ See his closing chapter, “Joseph: Father Nevertheless,” 220-223.

⁷ Dittes, 223.

And Joseph – *Joseph* – named him,
Joseph named his son,
named *his* ‘son:
Jesus.

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