



“The Unsung Hero”

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

Sunday, December 23, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I must confess that I've always felt a little sad about the way we've thought about Joseph. I say "we" because the Christian tradition has sort of ignored Joseph. When it comes to the Christmas story, we Christians seem to prefer the way Luke tells the story, with his emphasis on Mary, and we give short shrift to Matthew's account, in which Joseph is the principle figure. In our carols, Mary plays a dominant role and it is nearly impossible to find a carol in which Joseph is mentioned at all, let alone in a good light. "The Cherry Tree Carol," for instance, has Mary asking Joseph to pick cherries for her. Joseph responds by saying, "Let the father of the baby gather cherries for you." Ouch!

Joseph comes across to most of us as the consummate cuckold. He is a bit player - hardly needed and hardly respected. He doesn't have the same acceptance of his role that Mary displays. Joseph doesn't say, "let it be with me according to your word." Tradition seems to infer that Joseph is nearly dragged into this drama against his will.

In our creeds and confessions, we mention Mary by name. There is no mention of Joseph. "I believe in Jesus Christ...who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary..." says the Apostles' Creed. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ...for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary..." says the Nicene Creed. Where is Joseph? Nowhere to be found.

By and large, because of the fundamentalist fascination with the virgin birth, Joseph has been nearly written out of the Jesus story. Because there is a sexual overtone to the story, some in the church have continued to teach that sexuality of any kind is not a desirable trait in human beings, giving rise to doctrines that teach that Mary continued to be a perpetual virgin and that is a more desirable and certainly a more holy way of life. Certainly by the time both Matthew and Luke got around to writing their gospels, stories about Jesus' birth had been circulating and the questions of the marital status of those who were assumed to be his parent was questioned, and they sought to share what they believed was the "true and ultimate expression of why Jesus was the person he was."¹

But, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, let us take a moment to consider Joseph. He deserves at least a moment. He is "The Unsung Hero" of Christmas.

Matthew begins his story with an indelicate starting point. It is the dilemma which draws Joseph into the story. "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child..." Matthew presents the story of Jesus' birth beginning with an unmarried pregnant woman. Joseph, like most men I know, jumps to the conclusion that an act of adultery has been committed. Joseph is enraged, embarrassed, and humiliated. There is scandal about Jesus from the outset.

When this news came to light, Joseph makes up his mind to quietly break the engagement and spare Mary the scorn and judgment of the community. "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly," is how Matthew puts it. It seems that the story is to end in divorce.

But then, as Matthew tells it, there is a moment of revelation. An angel (angels seem to be quite busy at this time of year) - an angel appears, in a dream, to Joseph with new information. "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."

When Joseph awakens from his dream, he has a new attitude and outlook. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." Joseph embraces the invitation to be a partner with God in this new work that God is doing.

That, on the surface, is what Matthew has to say about the birth of Jesus. Joseph is the major character and we leave the first reading of the story feeling a little better about Joseph. But, there are still questions.

Many of those questions can be answered when we stop to remember that Matthew's gospel is being written to a Jewish audience. Throughout his gospel, Matthew presents Jesus as "the new Moses." The major sermon that Jesus gives, he gives on a mountain - not unlike Moses who goes up the mountain to receive the new law from God. The gospel-writer uses texts from the Old Testament seventy-two times as he peppers his gospel with the words, "this took place to fulfill what had been spoken..."

Now, on that basis of that information alone, you begin to see the birth story in Matthew in a different way. Go back to the genealogy with which Matthew begins his gospel and you'll find a few things to ponder.

First, Jesus is presented as a legitimate and authentic king. He is a descendant of the great King David and that is through Joseph's lineage. Second, Jesus is presented as an authentic Jew. The designation, "Son of David," makes that more than clear. Third, in his genealogy, Matthew presents five women - and they are an interesting collection of women. Matthew might be telling us that if God can work through this unusual collection of women to accomplish God's will and purpose, then God may be up to something now that no one could foresee. Fourth, look at the way Matthew begins his gospel: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The word *genealogy* is, in Greek, the word *genesis*. It could be that Matthew is intending to tell us that in Jesus, God has made a new beginning.

There is more that we could say, but we'll press on. Suffice it to say that, unlike Luke, Matthew's principle goal is to present Jesus as the Messiah - as *Emmanuel* - as the Promised One. In Jesus, God is beginning again and calling, in a new way, a people to be God's own. God is continuing the great work. God is doing a new thing. As Isaiah the prophet put it: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Matthew pens a very Jewish gospel and unless we are willing to read it through Jewish lenses, we will miss what Matthew is trying to tell us.

So, what does all of that have to do with us? Maybe more than we stop to think about at this time of year.

Maybe we need to remember that God is always reaching out to people just like you and me. God is never content to simply wait for people to find God. God is constantly reaching out to us - inviting us back - calling us to go deeper. God is not distant and removed from us. God is right here - with us - *Emmanuel*.

And maybe we need to remember that sometimes going along with what God is up to can be uncomfortable. This "happy" Christianity that seems to be plentiful these days - the idea that if you just do what God calls you to do, everything will be sunshine and roses - simply isn't true. Sometimes, doing what God calls you to do is difficult and trying and even painful. Sometimes people will talk about you behind your back. Sometimes gossip becomes gospel. It happened to Joseph and to Mary and to Jesus and it will probably happen to us.

And maybe, most importantly, we need to remember that God chooses to be involved with people like us and to change the world through people like us. In fact, that is the constant message of the scriptures. God works with and through ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. God worked through Joseph and Mary. God will work through us. And sometimes that service and ministry is quiet and rarely noticed. Sometimes it is the unsung, the unheralded, the unassuming, the inconspicuous, and the unpretentious, who do more than the rest of us will ever know.

I must confess, I like Joseph. He gets a bit of a bad rap, but what a faithful man. Joseph said “yes” - “yes” to what God was doing and “yes” to being a part of it. It’s people like Joseph who change the world.

Joseph allowed himself to be God’s servant, just as much as Mary did. Joseph accepted his role and did his part. Joseph answered the call of God. Joseph was and continues to be an unsung hero.

When they come to write your story and mine, may they be able to say exactly the same thing. For now and evermore. Amen.

1.) N. T. Wright, *Matthew, Part 1*, p. 6



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