

At the Manger: 2. Joseph, a Carpenter of the Lord
Matthew 1:18-25
December 5, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Last Friday was our day to spend with our grandson, Basil. He is almost 2 ½, and we decided to decorate the Christmas tree. And we had a great time. Amanda would unwrap each ornament and hand it to Basil who placed it on the tree until the area he could reach was filled. Then he'd either ask me to pick him up so he could reach higher or hand the ornament to me and say, "higher pappa." When all the ornaments were on the tree, we unwrapped the Nativity set. We hadn't told the story yet. Instead, we identified each character: shepherd, wiseman, mommy, daddy, and baby Jesus. Each character placed inside the stable. For a child whose attention span is that of a fly, he suddenly stopped, got close to the stable, fascinated by this baby that he had just placed inside the manger.

And I remembered when I was a child – how the figures of the Nativity held a certain fascination as if there were new every year. For some reason our nativity set never had a Joseph. I don't remember if it got lost or broken, or maybe a Joseph never came with the set. So we always took one of the shepherds to place next to Mary. We decided Joseph probably looked like one of them and aside from being Mary's traveling companion, we never really understood why Joseph was there – always the silent character in the story. This morning, we continue the series introduced last week. When we hear the Christmas story of Jesus' birth, what do we really know about the cast of Christmas characters, and how do their first century lives have relevance in our 21st century world?

There is not much in the Bible about Joseph. Most reference are simply to Jesus being the son of Joseph. Only the gospels of Matthew and Luke give us any information about Joseph and that is only in the descriptions of Jesus' birth. There are no words ever attributed to Joseph. The early Christians recognized this and by the second century wrote down what they had heard about Joseph or what they imagined Joseph was like. These writings are known as the apocryphal books to the New Testament. They were not accepted into the Bible, but from these books we learn that Joseph was an older man when he became engaged to Mary. He had been married once before and had children from his first wife. Last week, I read the apocryphal book, *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* – probably written in the 4th or 5th century. It is presented as a recording of a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples on the Mount of Olives in which he describes his life with his stepfather Joseph. We learn that Joseph was a skilled carpenter. He was forty years old when he married his first wife. They had six children, four sons and two daughters. When Joseph was 89 years old, his wife died.

We also learn that Mary was offered by her parents to the Temple when she was 3 years old, and she remained in the care of the Temple for 9 years. Because the average life expectancy in those days was only 30-35 years, a woman was usually married by the time she reached puberty. When Mary reached the age of 12, the priests decided to find a husband for her. They wanted more of a father figure for her than a husband, and they solicited candidates and assembled 12 older men from Judah. Each man carried a rod or branch, and as they came into the Temple court, one man's branch began to blossom with white flowers, and they knew he was the one. His name was Joseph. Their engagement lasted two years, so Mary was 14 and Joseph was 91 when they were married. Joseph was blessed with miraculous mental and physical health and lived until Jesus was 21, which would have made Joseph 111 years old when he died.

One of the things this story does is support the doctrine of the Virgin birth that Mary never consummated her marriage and remained a perpetual virgin. Since the New Testament mentions that Jesus had brothers and sisters, this story helps to explain how that was possible. They were children from Joseph's first marriage.

This is just one account of Joseph's life, and part of it or even all of it may be a legend. But it shows how Catholic and Orthodox theology developed the role of Joseph in the life of Jesus. In the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the guiding principle from Martin Luther was *sola scriptura* – only scripture would be the basis for Christian doctrine. When Protestants looked in the Bible, they saw no evidence that Joseph was previously married or that he was an older man. So, Protestants understood Joseph as a young man. Typically, a man was 14-15 because boys were required to be an apprentice under their fathers for a few years so they could support a family before getting married. How many of you have Nativity sets at home? One thing you might do today is look at Joseph. If he is an older man, the artist was probably influenced by Catholic theology. If a younger man, probably a Protestant influence.

All of this may be interesting, but it shows that we don't know much about Joseph. What do we know from what we do have in scripture? The last time Joseph is mentioned in the Bible, Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth and was speaking in the synagogue. **When he came to his hometown, he taught the people in their synagogue. They were surprised and said, "Where did he get this wisdom? Where did he get the power to work miracles? Isn't he the carpenter's son?"** I hear a tone of voice that questioned who Jesus was. Just a carpenter's son? And if Joseph was a carpenter, what did a carpenter do? Since homes were built from stone or mud that meant a carpenter made the doors and made and repaired farm implements for use in the fields. I brought in this table which was made by Don Brandt – a long-time member of this church who died a few years ago, but he left behind several tables such as this one. What I learn from looking at this table is his attention to detail, someone who was good with his hands, and was able to look at a piece of wood and image what it could be. Maybe God was trying to tell us something by choosing a carpenter. God chooses ordinary people and calls them to do extraordinary things. Could God be calling you?

In Matthew's gospel, we read that Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. This was a legally binding period of time before marriage. One day, Mary went to Joseph and said: "I have something important to tell you. An angel appeared to me and told me I'm going to have a baby. I haven't been with a man, but the angel told me that's okay because the Holy Spirit made this possible. The father of my baby is God." I don't know about the other men who are listening this morning, but I don't think I could accept this explanation and I'm not sure I could have gone through with the wedding. Mary's story was no more believable then than it would be today.

According to Jewish law, during the engagement period, a couple was considered husband and wife so that unfaithfulness was considered adultery and could be dissolved only by divorce or death. The law was clear. In Deuteronomy: **If a young woman who is a virgin is engaged to one man and another man meets up with her in a town and has sex with her, you must bring both of them to the city gates there and stone them until they die.** By the first century, this law had been relaxed. A woman would not have been put to death, but she would have been publicly humiliated much like what we read about with the scarlet letter in early American literature. But Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man and decided to divorce her quietly, which meant he was prepared to accept responsibility for the divorce, making it possible for Mary to marry the man who was the father of her baby.

With this as his plan, Joseph went to sleep that night. In a dream, he was told that Mary's pregnancy was the result of a divine act. It was as Mary told him. **She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.** (Jesus, a shortened form of Joshua, means "Yahweh saves.") The next morning, what did Joseph do? Remember, this was a dream! I don't remember most of my dreams but every now and then I wake up from a dream feeling that I need to do something and usually I respond by wondering whether it was real or just a dream. And if it is something I don't want to do, I brush it aside and within a few minutes I've forgotten all about the dream. But not Joseph. He has this dream, and in the dream, he hears the same unbelievable story that he heard from Mary and when he wakes, he makes the hard choice – not his first inclination, not what the religious law recommended, not what the prevailing culture of the day expected – but he is obedient to God. He steps outside his comfort zone to do what he believes God is calling him to do.

I wonder if that isn't why God chose Joseph as the earthly father who would raise God's own son. When we consider Jesus' teachings – the story of a loving father who waits for a wayward son to return home and then runs out to greet him when he sees him in the distance. Or how Jesus referred to God as Abba – a word that means Dad – and how that was Jesus' preferred way to talk to God. I wonder if that was the way he also talked about his earthly father. I wonder if we learn something about Joseph in the person of Jesus and who he would become. How many of us were shaped by our fathers? For some of us, the relationship with our fathers was a powerful, positive relationship. For others, it was more difficult and caused you to want to be different from your dad. As I was growing up, I decided the last thing in the world I wanted to be was a pastor, because that's what my dad was. He never once suggested I consider the ministry, but I look back on my childhood experience with Dad and I realize now that I'm more like him than I thought possible. In fact, he prepared me for ministry. He would take me along on hospital visits, asked me to help with worship, and every Sunday after church, we would go to the nursing home to visit persons who lived there. But there were aspects of my dad that I didn't want repeat. He put his whole self into his work. Though I didn't know the word then, he was a workaholic – and I decided I wouldn't spend as much time working as he did – but I couldn't help it. If you ask my family, I think they would tell you that I became a workaholic like my Dad. We are shaped and influenced by our parents in ways we may not even realize.

As we reflect on the story of Joseph, it might tell us how we are to relate to the children in our lives. What have you done to intentionally pass on the faith to your children? Are you teaching what really matters? How are you modeling what it means to be a person of faith? How have you provided to your children, grandchildren, or the next generation a picture of the love of God? "I was far from the perfect father, but my prayer was always: God, help me to show my children what your love looks like." And on Friday as I watched my grandson turn from the Christmas tree to gaze at the figures of the Nativity, I thought again of how the real gift of Christmas is not what we place under the tree but it is the gift that made Christmas possible. "God, help me to show my grandson what your love looks like."

We don't have photos of Joseph, but we do have paintings created by artists through the centuries. Let's take a minute to see a few of them. May you see a man who heard an extraordinary calling and did all he could to share God's love with his son. [video]

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 5, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Lord God, we give thanks for Joseph, for his kindness to Mary when he discovered she was with child, for his strength and faithfulness in being a dad to your Son

Jesus. Help us learn from him the importance of listening for your direction, no matter how challenging or unexpected. Amen.

Monday, December 6

Scripture: Genesis 35:16-20; 48:7

They left Bethel, and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into hard labor. During her difficult labor, the midwife said to her, "Don't be afraid. You have another son." As her life faded away, just before she died, she named him Ben-oni, but his father named him Benjamin. Rachel died and was buried near the road to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. Jacob set up a pillar on her grave. It's the pillar on Rachel's tomb that's still there today.

When I came back from Paddan-aram, Rachel died, to my sorrow, on the road in the land of Canaan, with some distance yet to go to Ephrathah, so I buried her there near the road to Ephrathah, which is Bethlehem."

Observation: The "little town of Bethlehem," where Jesus was born, was a fairly small city about six miles from Jerusalem. It had roots that ran deep in Israel's history. The Bible story first mentioned Bethlehem when Jacob's favorite wife Rachel died in childbirth. His grief at losing her was so great he mentioned it again as he neared the end of his own life. Jacob buried Rachel near Bethlehem and put up a monument to her that lasted for several hundred years.

Application: Jacob seemed to have loved Rachel practically from the moment he first met her. We can imagine the sadness and loss he felt as, traveling along a desolate road, it became clear that giving birth to her second son Benjamin was going to cost Rachel her life. How has grief touched your life? In what ways, tangible or intangible, do you seek to preserve your memories of loved ones you have lost?

Prayer: Lord God, while Jacob mourned his beloved wife, you were at work through him and his descendants to bring Jesus into our world. Help me, even when tears streak my face, never to lose hope in your steady redeeming work. Amen.

Tuesday, December 7

Scripture: Ruth 1:1, 16-19, 22; 4:11-17

During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah to dwell in the territory of Moab.

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it.

So both of them went along until they arrived at Bethlehem. When they arrived at Bethlehem, the whole town was excited on account of them, and the women of the town asked, "Can this be Naomi?"

Thus Naomi returned. And Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, returned with her from the territory of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD grant that the woman who is coming into your household be like Rachel and like Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel. May you be fertile in Ephrathah and may you preserve a name in Bethlehem. And may your household be like the household of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the children that the LORD will give you from this young woman.” So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. He was intimate with her, the LORD let her become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi, “May the LORD be blessed, who today hasn’t left you without a redeemer. May his name be proclaimed in Israel. He will restore your life and sustain you in your old age. Your daughter-in-law who loves you has given birth to him. She’s better for you than seven sons.” Naomi took the child and held him to her breast, and she became his guardian. The neighborhood women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They called his name Obed. He became Jesse’s father and David’s grandfather.

Observation: The story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth centered in Bethlehem. (Today’s reading just samples it. It is only four chapters long—if you’ve never read it, try to find the time to do so.) It was a story of loyalty, devotion and commitment, with far-reaching effects. Ruth became the great-grandmother of the great King David. (You can read about the prophet Samuel going to Bethlehem to anoint the boy David as future king in 1 Samuel 16:1-13.)

Application: The story of Ruth told how God used Boaz, a prosperous farmer, to help Ruth, a Moabite immigrant, and her mother-in-law Naomi, by letting her glean in his fields. From his generosity came their marriage. From that came a line of descendants that led to King David, and, centuries later, to Jesus. When have you seen an outwardly small act of sharing (in resources, time, or talent) launch positive results that went far beyond what the giver might have expected?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, son of David, thank you for men like Boaz and women like Ruth who, in long-ago Bethlehem, let their generosity and love set events in motion that led to your birth as my Savior in that same town. Amen.

Wednesday, December 8

Scripture: Judges 6:11-16; Amos 1:1-2; 7:14-15

Then the LORD’s messenger came and sat under the oak at Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite. His son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to hide it from the Midianites. The LORD’s messenger appeared to him and said, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior!” But Gideon replied to him, “With all due respect, my Lord, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his amazing works that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Didn’t the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and allowed Midian to overpower us.” Then the LORD turned to him and said, “You have strength, so go and rescue Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not personally sending you?” But again Gideon said to him, “With all due respect, my Lord, how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I’m the youngest in my household.” The LORD replied, “Because I’m with you, you’ll defeat the Midianites as if they were just one person.”

These are the words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa. He perceived these things concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, in the days of Judah’s King Uzziah and in the days of Israel’s King Jeroboam, Joash’s son. He said: The LORD roars from Zion. He shouts from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

Amos answered Amaziah, “I am not a prophet, nor am I a prophet’s son; but I am a shepherd, and a trimmer of sycamore trees. But the LORD took me from shepherding the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

Observation: Gideon the farmer or the shepherd Amos are only two examples of many we find in Scripture showing that, long before Jesus’ earthly father Joseph, God often called hard, conscientious but ordinary workers. The point is that God seeks people with receptive hearts, whatever their earthly status.

Application: Gideon’s story was striking. God’s messenger greeted him as “mighty warrior.” Gideon, not feeling like a mighty warrior, asked, “How can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I’m the youngest in my household.” And “The LORD replied, “Because I’m with you, you’ll defeat the Midianites.” When have you seen God’s power accomplish something through you or someone you know that you couldn’t have done on your own?

Prayer: Lord God, you achieve most of your work through people willing to put themselves in the service of your kingdom. Make me, like Gideon, Amos or Joseph, one of those people. Amen.

Thursday, December 9

Scripture: Matthew 1:16, 18-19

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

Observation: The gospel of Matthew did not duplicate the gospel of Luke, but rather complemented it. While Luke told the story of Jesus’ birth through the eyes of Mary, Matthew told the story from the standpoint of Joseph, who was engaged to Mary when the story began. Although Mary lived in the tiny village of Nazareth, it seems from the slender evidence the gospels give us that Bethlehem was Joseph’s hometown (Luke 2:1-4). If so, that suggests that their families arranged the marriage, as was common in their time and place.

Application: It would be nice if the GPS could have you read an eloquent speech Joseph made about being Jesus’ earthly father. But, unlike Mary, Joseph has no such speech. We don’t read a single word he speaks in the Gospels. He is the patron saint of those who serve and do the right thing without seeking any credit. How easy or hard do you find it to be content when the spotlight falls on someone else more than on you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, continue to teach me the lessons you learned from Joseph. Help me to value opportunities to bless and serve others more than I value applause from others. Amen.

Friday, December 10

Scripture: Matthew 13:53-57; Mark 6:1-6

When Jesus finished these parables, he departed. When he came to his hometown, he taught the people in their synagogue. They were surprised and said, "Where did he get this wisdom? Where did he get the power to work miracles? Isn't he the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother named Mary? Aren't James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers? And his sisters, aren't they here with us? Where did this man get all this?" They were repulsed by him and fell into sin. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns and in their own households."

Jesus left that place and came to his hometown. His disciples followed him. On the Sabbath, he began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were surprised. "Where did this man get all this? What's this wisdom he's been given? What about the powerful acts accomplished through him? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't he Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" They were repulsed by him and fell into sin. Jesus said to them, "Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households." He was unable to do any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was appalled by their disbelief.

Then Jesus traveled through the surrounding villages teaching.

Observation: In keeping with Joseph's relative obscurity, the gospel writers never specifically said what he did for a living. They never directly called him a carpenter. However, both Matthew and Mark recorded that when Jesus went to Nazareth, many of the people rejected him. In Matthew's version, they called him "the carpenter's son." According to Mark, they identified Jesus himself as a carpenter. It seems logical that he would have learned his father's trade.

Application: The texts mention Jesus' mother and siblings, but not his father. Most scholars believe Joseph died sometime before Jesus' public ministry began. (Again, the gospels simply do not mention that.) Joseph apparently had a 12 to 30-year window to help protect and shape Jesus' growth. What opportunities do you have to serve, bless, or shape people and events? Are you ever tempted to think those opportunities will last forever?

Prayer: Lord, the gospels suggest that you and your earthly father were carpenters. Sadly, many people in your day added the word "just" before carpenter. Help me to value all people, not only the ones who are like me or impress me. Amen.

Saturday, December 11

Scripture: Micah 5:2-5; John 7:40-43

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days. Therefore, he will give them up until the time when she who is in labor gives birth. The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. They will dwell secure, because he will surely become great throughout the earth; he will become one of peace. When Assyria invades our land and treads down our fortresses, then we will raise up against him seven shepherds and eight human princes.

When some in the crowd heard these words, they said, “This man is truly the prophet.” Others said, “He’s the Christ.” But others said, “The Christ can’t come from Galilee, can he? Didn’t the scripture say that the Christ comes from David’s family and from Bethlehem, David’s village?” So the crowd was divided over Jesus.

Observation: Bethlehem, we know, but what’s this Ephrathah? It meant “fruitful,” and was the name of the district around Bethlehem. The prophet Micah preached in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. As the armies of the mighty Assyrian Empire threatened Jerusalem, Micah promised that God would send a deliverer, born in Bethlehem. Hebrew scribes quoted Micah 5:2 to tell King Herod the Messiah’s birthplace. John recorded Jesus’ enemies arguing that he couldn’t possibly be God’s Messiah. They used his growing up in Galilee as proof: “Didn’t the scripture say that the Christ comes from David’s family and from Bethlehem, David’s village?” Of course, he did – if they had only paid attention to a small detail like his father’s hometown.

Application: Micah stressed God’s ability to do big things in people and in settings that seemed minor. The divine ruler born in little Bethlehem, he said, would “surely become great throughout the earth.” When have you seen God do something big through something little? John’s symbolism underlined that Jesus, born in Bethlehem (which meant “house of bread”) was the bread of life, the source of living water. How will you allow him to nourish your soul this Christmas season?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I don’t live anywhere near Bethlehem, but your love and grace have touched and changed my life. Thank you for being a God who does big things even through the small things of earth. Amen.