

Advent 4A Sermon 121910
Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

In the name of the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

In the Gospel of Luke, the Virgin Mary – the mother of our Lord – is the focus of the early chapters. It is in Luke, for instance, that we get the wonderful *Magnificat*, in which the young girl is told that she will have God’s child and she responds with:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name¹.

What a beautiful and eloquent soliloquy that is; and what a wonderful way for Mary to express her relationship with God. We get references to – and conversation with Mary throughout Luke, as well as in the other synoptics (and even within John’s Gospel).

In Matthew though, the story of the Nativity – the birth and early life of Jesus – is told from the perspective of Joseph the carpenter from Nazareth. Unfortunately for us, unlike the Virgin Mary, we know precious little about Joseph. He is mentioned by name a total of eight (8) times in the first two chapters of Matthew. He also gets three (3) mentions in Luke. But ... not once in all of the Bible does the human father of our Lord speak. He does not get a wonderful hymn as Mary does in the *Magnificat*. He doesn’t even get an “*Ordinar-icat*.” I think that it is a real shame that Joseph does not get a

¹ Luke 1:46-49 (NRSV)

speaking part in this drama; because as far as I am concerned, there are few characters in the Biblical story with more to teach us than Mary's husband, Joseph.

I have admitted from this pulpit before that I was and am a fan of the HBO series, *The Sopranos*. In one episode of the series, Tony Soprano – the neurotic gangster – is in a session with his psychiatrist when he observes, “Nowadays, everybody’s gotta go to shrinks, and counselors, and go on Sally Jessy Raphael and talk about their problems. Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type. That was an American².” Now while I would never condone the behavior or morality of the Tony Soprano character, I do think that his statement says something important about the American male and how St. Joseph can connect with us.

From the time most of us were born, American males over a certain age were taught that “big boys don’t cry,” and when you get hurt you should “take it like a man.” Although our generation holds itself out to be more enlightened, we have raised a new generation that has its own versions of these sayings – things like: “put on your big boy pants,” and “man up,” (which, by the way, is just an urbanized version of a very old Texas saying, to “Cowboy up” when things get tough or demanding). But the message across generations is the same: men are supposed to be decisive, strong and silent. Those are the traits of Joseph the carpenter in this Gospel.

² “The Strong Silent Type” *The Sopranos* by David Chase, (Tony Soprano) episode 4-10, 11/17/2002 HBO Films.

In Matthew's telling of this story, Joseph hears from God three (3) times – by way of angels appearing to him in dreams. The first time is in the story we heard Tracie read just now. Subsequently, an angel told him to take Mary and the newly born Jesus and to run away to Egypt. And then finally, the angel visited again and told him that all was safe at home, so that he and the family could return from Egypt. And in all three instances, Joseph's response was the same – without a word, he got up out of his bed, and set about doing what God had commanded him to do. And it is this strong and silent obedience – this wonderfully faithful devotion to God – that we could all hopefully understand from Joseph's example.

Joseph of Nazareth definitely teaches us the lesson of strength and silent obedience. No matter what was thrown his way, he stepped up and took care of it, without complaint. First, he discovered that the young woman he was engaged to was, in fact, pregnant by someone other than him. That would be a problem for any man, of any generation. But in Joseph and Mary's time, the problem was huge. Jewish law, as set out in the book of Deuteronomy, says this:

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.³

³ Deut 22:23-24 (NRSV)

Joseph had multiple problems with this pregnancy. First was the problem of living in a small town and the gossip that always accompanies an unmarried young girls' pregnancy. And then there was the issue of "the law" and its requirement that – upon proof of her condition – Mary be put to death. But, as Matthew tells us, Joseph was a righteous man and even before God sent the angel to see him, Joseph knew that he couldn't be party to Mary's stoning. He intended to quietly divorce her and send her away where she might be ashamed, but she would at least be alive.

After the angel spoke to him though, there was no doubt in his mind what his course of action would be. He would claim the child as his own – which brought about a whole new crop of problems. Not only was he to be a step-father, but his son was to be God Incarnate – Emmanuel – God living a human life.

A few years ago, both Trisha Yearwood and Sawyer Brown recorded a new Christmas song written by Skip Ewing. Ewing's lyrics capture Joseph's situation very well. In *It Wasn't His Child*, the singer says:

He was her man, she was his wife
And late one winter night
He knelt by her
As she gave birth
But it wasn't his child
It wasn't his child

Yet still he took him as his own
And as he watched him grow
It brought him joy
He loved that boy
But it wasn't his child

It wasn't his child

But like a father
He was strong and kind and good
And I believe he did his best
It wasn't easy for him
But he did all he could
His son was different from the rest
It wasn't his child
It wasn't his child

Joseph took on an awesome responsibility – the raising of a child. As all parents know, rearing a child is a difficult and demanding task at the best of times. No matter how much you may love the child – nor how much joy the child may bring to your life – bringing up a child is a huge responsibility and a very demanding undertaking. But when you are talking about raising a child who was born to another, those issues are magnified tremendously. And Joseph did it: without hesitation and without complaint.

Joseph was all of the things Americans believe a man should be: a man of action; a man of few words and a man of immense internal strength. But the thing that makes Joseph so different from many of us is the fact that he was totally and completely guided by the call of God in his life. He already had all of the characteristics that made him a good male role model. It was not until God's call to him though that Joseph really blossomed into a great example of faith – one that we take great note of, even though he does not speak in the Bible.

God calls us to do things that require the same amount of faith that Joseph showed. It is up to us whether or not we follow his example and allow ourselves to be roused from

our sleep, get up and set about the work God has given us to do – without complaint and without hesitation. That is what God asked of Joseph and it is what God asks of us. I pray that at least occasionally we will do as well as Mary’s husband did. Amen.