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Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A - RCL
December 23, 2007
St. Margaret's Church
Annapolis, Maryland

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable and pleasing in your sight, or Lord our strength and our redeemer. AMEN.

Which one is Joseph? That was the question I always had to ask my mother when I was little as we were setting up our nativity scenes before Christmas. My mother now has a collection of about 100 crèches from all over the world, and we have always had a debate over how to set them up. Some of you may know that I am quite a detail-oriented person. I say Mary was on the right of the manger and Joseph was on the left; my mother says that Mary was on the left and Joseph was on the right. That was not the hard part for me though because I would simply go back and move them into the correct position when she wasn't looking!

The hardest part for me was determining just which one of the figurines was supposed to be Joseph. There always seemed to be one extra figurine thrown in to confuse me. Mary and Jesus were easy enough to identify, but how can you tell the difference between a shepherd and Joseph? I mean, is that a shepherd's staff in that guy's hand or a walking stick that Joseph used on the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Is Joseph the one kneeling in adoration, or is that the innkeeper? Who is the guy holding the lantern? Which one is Joseph?

The gospels don't tell us very much about Joseph. We read in Matthew's gospel this morning that Joseph was engaged to Mary when she "was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). At first, Joseph did not want to have any more to do with Mary. He simply "planned to dismiss her quietly" (1:19). But after Joseph decided to leave Mary without blame, an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid, that this son was from the Holy Spirit and was to be named Jesus. When he woke up he followed the angel's command and helped bring Jesus into this world.

Joseph is the one that at first wanted to maintain his reputation as being a 'righteous man' by disassociating himself from an unwed mother. God called Joseph to a ministry he didn't particularly want to undertake. But he heeded God's call and supported a woman who was to bear the savior of the world. Joseph is the one who gave up his own righteousness in order to give way to God's. He allows the story to proceed; if Joseph had not paid attention to his dream, Mary might have been shunned from society forever, feeding Jesus whatever she could scrounge up from the streets.ⁱ

Joseph is the one who wakes up one early morning to a life that has been shattered by an angel and the Holy Spirit: his wife is soon to be a mother, his reputation is smeared, and his future is in shambles. Joseph could have become a deadbeat dad and moved away to an easier life. But he does not do that. Instead, "He claims the scandal and gives it his name. He owns the mess – he legitimates it – and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born."ⁱⁱ

Joseph is also the one who built things. We don't know if he was as good a carpenter as Norm Abram from *This Old House*; granted he didn't have an electric circular saw, but he must have been good enough to support a pregnant teenage wife and a radical future king. He must have been able to

ignore the gossip and grumbling and take it all in stride or else he could never have endured for as long as he did.

Joseph was the one who taught Jesus what he knew, to value everything about people, even their simple everyday duties. Joseph was the one who gave Jesus his “down-to-earth common sense, and an appreciation for labor and [the] laborer, an unflinching pragmatism.”ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph was a teacher. “It was Joseph who taught Jesus to live and to love as one of us, as one with us”^{iv} and one among us, Emmanuel.

Luke provides us with a different account of Joseph in his gospel when he tells the story of Joseph and Mary losing Jesus in the temple. Joseph was probably the one who was angry when Jesus stayed behind. I can just hear him saying to Mary, “Well, he’s not *my* boy! You go look for him!” But of course after three whole days of looking, “they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). We don’t learn anything directly about Joseph but that he was faithful in seeking Jesus out and taking him back home where he “increased in wisdom and stature, and in divine human favor” (Luke 2:52).

We are just like Joseph in that we are all called to give up our own righteousness in order to give way to God’s.^v Mary was the vessel that God used in order to make Christ manifest in the world. Joseph was the vessel that God used to build a home on earth for Jesus. We are the vessels that God would have to preach the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth. But Joseph didn’t block the doorway when Jesus arrived. Joseph is the one who would have never chosen the factors he was given in his life, but he chose to do the best with what he was given.

Surely he didn’t know what to do with a rebel son who failed to come home for three days, but when Mary and Joseph found him, we don’t hear that they punish him or put him on restriction. They simply accepted Jesus as the Messiah and got out of the way so that he could do his work and fulfill his ministry. Joseph probably wanted to roll over and pretend that it all was just a dream and not a calling to live a radically different life. We sometimes want to go back to sleep and refuse to bear the prophetic message we hear from the Holy Spirit. But instead of running away from the challenge, Joseph accepted it and paved the way for Jesus to live among us.

I wonder where you are in the manger scene this morning. Are you getting out of the way so that the light of Christ can truly shine through, or are you feeding the cattle and missing the birth of Jesus entirely? Are you making way for the wise men to present their gifts to the newborn king, or are you too busy screaming at the innkeeper for the lousy accommodations? Are you letting the children come to Jesus, or are you keeping him to yourself, out of their arms’ reach?

Which one is Joseph? Perhaps Joseph stood to the left side of the cradle, or maybe he held Mary up on the right side of Jesus. I don’t think it really matters. What does matter is the fact that Joseph did not seek his own glory, but rather he got out of the way so that Jesus could come into this world and be among us - Emmanuel.

ⁱ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Believing the Impossible” in *Gospel Medicine*. Boston: Cowley, 1995, p. 156.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 157.

ⁱⁱⁱ Portaro, Sam. *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. Boston: Cowley, 1998, p. 61.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Taylor, p. 154.