

The Call of Joseph
Matthew 1:18-21
December 17, 2017 – The Third Sunday of Advent

We are in the third of our sermon series on Joseph, the earthly father, or we might call him the adopted father, or even the step-father of Jesus. Last week we discussed how Joseph was, as the bible puts it, a righteous man. Rather than subjecting Mary to public disgrace and humiliation, or maybe even death, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. In so doing, when Mary was discovered to be pregnant, it would be assumed that Joseph was the father who subsequently divorced his pregnant fiancée. He would be dishonored, but Mary might largely retain her honor. It's at this point that today's story picks up.

As Joseph was struggling with the issue of his pregnant bride, an angel or we might say "a messenger" of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. I use that word "messenger" because the original Greek can rightly be translated as "angel" or "messenger." Today, when we hear the word "angel," we think of a cherub with wings and a halo flying around. Well, God sends messages in a variety of ways. In Luke's Gospel, when the Angel Gabriel came to Mary, he apparently came in a human form, for Luke says he was sent by God to Nazareth where he came to her and greeted her. It appears that she was fully awake when she received the news. But, indeed, the Lord speaks in a variety of ways. He spoke to Moses out of a burning bush. He spoke to Job out of a whirlwind; and, I might add, the same is true today. God is still speaking, speaking to you and to me. Sometimes, God speaks through the lips or actions of others. Sometimes God speaks through our own thoughts, through our consciences, or through our very sense of call. And, I tell you some people indeed see visions, hear voices, or dream dreams.

Seminary students are often asked to explain their sense of call to ordained ministry. Personally, my sense of call was that still, small voice nagging in the back of my head, purely a strong sense that I should enter the ordained ministry. But I have friends that say they actually heard a voice calling; and they can describe the voice in detail. And, in some cases, they were with others; and the others did not hear the voice. While the scientist in me may wonder about their physical hearing of a divine voice, I will not diminish the reality of their call. Indeed God speaks to each of us in a variety of ways. God came to Joseph in a dream.

There's another Joseph in the Bible that God called in a dream, another Joseph whom God gave the power store up food, to save the people from seven years of famine. That's the Joseph with the multi-colored coat. That's the Joseph, son of the patriarch Jacob. You can read about him in Genesis; and, oh by the way... Do you remember that genealogy that begins the Gospel of Matthew? Did anybody notice that Joseph, the husband of Mary, had a father named Jacob? I

don't think that's a coincidence. Both Joseph's had a divine call to partake in God's plan to save the people.

A messenger of God appears to this Joseph in a dream, and tells him, "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child she is carrying 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." Friends, that's a call.

I've spoken of call statements many times in the past from this pulpit. I've preached about the call of Noah and Moses and David. I've preached about the call of the great prophets like Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah. But I tell you today, this call of Joseph might be second only to the call of Jesus, himself. Dare I say, it might even be greater than that wonderful call of Mary; because Joseph was called to raise the Son of God. And Joseph, the humble carpenter, the righteous man said, "Yes." Joseph chose to care for and protect and raise a child that was not his own; and, not only is this child not his own, but he's just been informed that this is one very special child. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he "will save his people from their sins." And the messenger told him "Do not be afraid!"

Friends, I've never been blessed with children of my own, but other parents have told me how scary it can be to hold their newborn baby in their arms, to look into the baby's eyes, and realize that you, the parent have just been given a wonderful gift, yes, but also a huge responsibility. You, the parent will be responsible for caring for this child, for raising them, for feeding and clothing them, and that's the easy part. You'll also be responsible for the example you set, for the decisions you will make on their behalf, for their education, for their value system; and, when all is said and done, you can only pray that they will make the right decisions for themselves, that they will follow the path of love and peace, righteousness and justice, care for self and care for others. That's one scary situation. Now, imagine being told that this child is truly divine, that he will save his people, that this is God's plan, and you are being held responsible for nurturing that plan. "Don't be afraid?" I'd be scared to death.

Yes, I believe Jesus was fully divine, but I cannot believe that as a two year old or a five year old or even a ten year old he did not need the same love and care as any other child. And that responsibility fell to both Mary and Joseph. I spoke a lot about Joseph, the Mentor, two weeks ago, and I'm not going to repeat that sermon here. Let me simply say that, from all we know, from all we can deduce, Joseph was one fine, wonderful, loving, caring, teaching, and sharing father to God's only Son.

Now, I don't want to shortchange Mary in this process. Certainly mother Mary had an influence on her Son. We know that. The Bible tells us that. But we cannot discount the influence of a father, a male role model on a son. I can speak first hand. I told you two weeks ago, I had a lot more in common with my mother than with my father; and my mother was hugely loving. I spent a lot more time

with my mother. But I have little doubt that my father had the greater influence on me. That's simply the fact of a male role model.

So again I ask, "So What?" So what about us? I recently heard a radio interview with a journalist that is living in China and studying the Chinese education system. Do you know, in China, teachers are held in as high of esteem and paid as highly as doctors? Isn't that the way it should be? Is there any greater task than educating the next generation of young people? Indeed children are our most valuable possessions; and there is no more valuable work than contributing to their growth in mind, body, and spirit. And how do we do that? Abraham Lincoln said, "There is just one way to bring up a child in the way he should go and that is to travel that way yourself." Indeed we as parents, we as Christians, we as a church, we as a community and we as a nation need to set an example for our children. Every teacher knows children learn more from what we do than from what we say. Joseph had a call, a call to raise the Son of God, to nurture him, to set an example for him. Joseph had a call to further God's plan for the salvation of the world.

A few days ago, I was leafing through one of my Christmas books, when I stumbled upon this writing: "Joseph's Story" by Pamela Kennedy¹. I think it really sums up our meditations for the last few weeks, and I bring it to you now.

(Read "Joseph's Story")

Indeed, Joseph had a call. It was a frightening call, a call that would require faith in the Lord; for, only through that faith would he and his loving wife, Mary, have the courage to follow where God led them.

To what are you being called? Are you being called to nurture some young person? Are you being called to work for justice and righteousness in our community and in our world? Are you being called to work with the least and the lost? With Joseph as our model, may we have the strength, the faith, and the courage to answer the call, that the world will be a better place for our sharing of the Love of God.

Let us pray. . .

Lord, let us learn from Joseph.
May we hear your call on our lives,
and may we have the courage to answer that call,
to share your love, your peace, and your joy.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
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¹ *In Search of Christmas* (Ideals Publication, A Division of Guideposts, Nashville, 2001) 64.