

“Joseph from Bethlehem”

December 6, 2015

2nd Sunday of Advent

The People and Places of Christmas. Mary gets a lot of attention from Gospel writer Luke. We hear her conversation with the angel who comes. We hear her sing after Elizabeth greets her. Luke doesn't give us much on Joseph, though. In fact, we have to go to Matthew to get the scoop on Joseph - earthly father of Jesus.

Matthew starts with family history that ends with Joseph. We know his pedigree - from the line of David. We know he's a good guy - a righteous man, which, for Gospel writer Matthew, would mean that he's faithful to God as a good Hebrew man would be.

But we don't hear a word from Joseph's mouth in any Gospel account. We only get the assurance that he's a righteous man. We get a sense of his character, though, as he hears the news from Mary, makes a plan to deal with, and then has a dream that changes everything.

What might Joseph say? I'd invite you to listen...

MEDIA: “THE FIRST CHRISTMAS - JOSEPH”

What I don't understand is why he chose me. Powerful words as we think about what it means to be on this journey together. We know little about Joseph, only that he was a carpenter because that's how he's described in the Gospels when someone calls Jesus “the carpenter's son.” But consider Joseph's hometown and his part in God's plan to bring salvation to the world.

Bethlehem is near Jerusalem - roughly six miles away. It was bigger than Nazareth, and the folks who lived there were most likely working-class people who served the needs of people in Jerusalem. The name means “House of Bread,” and perhaps in addition to carpenters, there were also farmers, millers, and bakers who lived there and took bread to Jerusalem. Rev. Adam Hamilton says that most folks in Bethlehem were probably fairly humble. That's my sense of Joseph - a humble, caring, faithful man.

But Bethlehem also had history. Rachel, of Jacob and Rachel, died while giving birth. Benjamin and was buried near Bethlehem. Remember that Ruth and Naomi go to Bethlehem when they leave Moab. And when people thought of Bethlehem, they thought of King David.

They probably also thought of the prophet Micah, whose words we read earlier. Micah said that a new king would come from Bethlehem - a king who would be a shepherd to the people. So God chooses Joseph from Bethlehem to be a part of bringing hope and peace to the people.

But I'm sure that Joseph had real fears. He was backed into a corner and focused on how to take care of this embarrassing situation as quietly as possible. The Law said that he should tell everyone that Mary was pregnant. She'd be an adulteress and could be stoned without a second thought.

But even before Jesus' birth, we see the beginnings of what Jesus will do through Joseph's actions. Instead of going along with the written Law that told him to expose Mary, Joseph plans to spare her.

He probably had high hopes and big dreams for what was ahead for him and Mary. They were in the second stage of a three-part marriage ritual. First, there was the engagement, which sometimes happened even before the bride and groom were old enough to make their own decision. Then, there was the betrothal when the engagement was ratified. A couple was locked into marriage, but they didn't sleep together – that lasted for a year. And finally, the marriage itself with a festival to celebrate. But even in the betrothal period, the only way to get out of it was through a divorce that was witnessed by two people.

But then there was his dream. When the angel comes to Joseph, his plan changes. Joseph is Jesus' earthly father, a role that calls him to witness all the joy and pain that Jesus will experience in his time on earth.

Joseph gives up his practical plans – his logical plans – to follow God's plan. Remember that he's a righteous man - someone who has right aim before God. He trusts in what God is doing. He risks everything. He doesn't leave Mary. He stays with her and takes on the role of Jesus' earthly father.

Like Mary, Joseph is a servant of God who dares to stand on God's promises and say "yes." He trusts that God is at work for good even with uncertainty ahead. He reminds me that hospitality, acceptance, and love are a part of this journey - to make room for Christ, accept our place as a support for God's work, and commit to loving God and others.

And Joseph's call to serve points to who Jesus is. Jesus comes to fulfill what has been said to God's people from the beginning, yet he doesn't come as people expect. He's not a king like David who promises victory, or one who will come down from heaven to judge, or a priest who will guide people through the Law, or a prophet like Moses. Joseph is given the name Jesus for the baby because he will save the people from their sins.

Jesus is a heavenly king, not an earthly king—his power comes from God, and victory comes by way of death on a cross for the sake of all God's people—for our sake. He comes to judge, but not on human terms. He looks on people's hearts and sees who

they truly are. He sees each of us as a child of God. Jesus comes so that we might know what it means to be loved unconditionally—to be loved with God’s grace.

Jesus is a priest, but not one who will simply guide people through what has been written in the Law. He will challenge the Law to bring peace and justice to those who are looked upon as if they have no value, because all people are cherished by God. Jesus is not a prophet like Moses, yet his words and actions fulfill what God has promised since the dawn of creation. He will bring God’s Law to the people, but with a new direction of love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

Jesus is more than a king, a judge, a priest, and a prophet. Jesus is a Savior, our Savior. Jesus is God with us. He sets us free from sin. He challenges us when we try to box in God’s Law and calls us to love one another. Jesus’ birth fulfills what is written in the prophets the people of his time knew so well. He fills full of meaning what has been proclaimed.

Friends, the name “Jesus” tells us two important things about God. First, God saves us. God is the author of salvation. God created us for connection. God wants a relationship with us, and we find forgiveness and mercy through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is also called “Emmanuel.” The second point is that God is with us. We say that God is everywhere, which is true. But how powerful to think that God is with us! Isn’t that what we want to know? I want to know that God is with me where I am today – whatever it is that I feel or think or struggle with or celebrate. Jesus tells me that God is with me right now and that God will hear me when I pray right now.

Jesus is the One who restores us and whose light shines on us in all times. He is the One who offers life and hope for our brokenness. It’s because of Jesus that we can dare to look around us and say that God is with us—that there is hope—that peace can prevail.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.