

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on December 5, 2021

JOSEPH: A MODEL OF OBEDIENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife. Matthew 1:24

Today we continue our Advent focus on the core stories and characters associated with Jesus' birth. The character that we consider today is Joseph. He sometimes is the forgotten person in the nativity story.

Let us begin with the basic facts that we have about Joseph. The information we have about Joseph is found in Luke and Matthew. Remember that Mark and John do not tell us anything about the early years of Jesus. They only tell the story of Jesus' public ministry. Mark and John start their narratives with Jesus' baptism. Joseph is not part of the story. The absence of Joseph from all the Gospels during Jesus' public ministry leads us to believe he had died sometime after Jesus was thirteen. But there is no documentation that tells us of his demise.

There are four important events in Jesus' life in which Joseph plays an important role.

The first is in the birth of Jesus. We are told that Mary and Joseph were engaged when Mary was found to be pregnant. The normal marriage practices of the first century were very different from our own. In the normal Jewish marriage there were three steps.

The first was the engagement. The engagement was often made when the couple were only children. It was usually made through the parents or through a professional match-maker. It was often made without the couple ever seeing each other. Marriage was held to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of human passion and the human heart.

The second step was the betrothal. The betrothal might be called the ratification of the engagement. At this point if the bride or groom wanted to back out they could. But once the betrothal was entered into it was absolutely binding. The betrothal lasted one year. During that year they were known as man and wife, though they did not live together. It was a year of preparation. This relationship could only be ended by divorce.

The final step was the wedding. This was a weeklong celebration in which the bride and groom were treated as a queen and king. It was one of the high points in the life of a Jewish peasant.

Joseph and Mary were betrothed, the second step in the marriage process, when she was found to be pregnant. Joseph knew he was not the father. He could have made Mary pay a very high price for her betrayal, but he seems to have been a kind person who wanted to divorce her quietly. Then Joseph had a dream in which he is told the baby comes from God and that he should take Mary as his wife.

Joseph obeys God and goes through with the marriage. We learn Joseph takes his pregnant wife to Bethlehem in order to fulfill a census. It was there that Mary gave birth to Jesus. While in Bethlehem they have two sets of visitors. First, came the shepherds who

had been told of Jesus' birth, and then some time later, Magi from the east following a star came bringing gifts to the new born king.

When the visitors had left, Joseph had another dream in which he was warned that King Herod was out to kill Jesus. So, Joseph packed up his family and fled to Egypt. There Joseph worked to provide for his family for two years until King Herod died and it was safe to return to Israel. They settled in Nazareth and Joseph continued his work as a carpenter.

There are only two other events in which Joseph plays a role. These are found in Luke's gospel and are centered on the temple in Jerusalem. Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to the temple for special sacrifices upon his birth, and again they travel to the temple for Passover when Jesus was twelve.

That is basically all we know about Joseph from the New Testament. What does this life of Joseph teach us?

First, I think Joseph has two messages for male followers of Jesus. Joseph respected Mary and provided protection, support and love for his family. We live in a culture that faces a crisis in our families. We know all the statistics are not good concerning the general health of families. The out of wedlock births in our country are 40%. The percentage of able-bodied males, of working age, not in the work force is at all-time highs. The dropout rate for males far exceeds that of females. Only 40% of college students today are male. There seems to be an epidemic of males not taking responsibility for their lives or their families.

In recent issue of the magazine "First Things" we find this poem by Mary Patrice Woehling:

**He scrubbed the trough and filled it with fresh hay.
The midnight sky was bright and hard and raw;
The constellations danced above cold clay.**

**That night the heavens put on a display
That froze wise man and shepherd mute with awe.
He scrubbed the trough and filled it with fresh hay.**

**And wondered how long they would have to stay
In Bethlehem fulfilling Caesar's law.
That night the heavens put on a display.**

**While Herod hoped the Magi would betray
The child sleeping snugly in the straw.
He scrubbed the trough and filled it with fresh hay.**

**Too cold and busy to kneel down to pray;
His fingers, stiff and wet, would need to thaw.
That night the heavens put on a display.**

**While Joseph worked and watched as Mary lay
And nursed the baby. Sheep and oxen saw**

**He scrubbed the trough and filled it with fresh hay;
The constellations danced above cold clay.**

The words He scrubbed the trough and filled it with fresh hay remind us that Joseph models for us the male who fulfills his obligations to his family even in the most basic ways. Love is made up of many small sacrifices. Joseph models for all males, stepping up and taking responsibility.

Joseph also has a second message for men. Joseph is an equal partner with Mary in Jesus' religious development. Religion is not just for women and children. One of the crises in the church today is the lack of men participating in worship, fellowship, education, mission and governance.

Our congregation is an exception. Look around you today and you will see lots of men in worship. Men are involved in education, fellowship and serving on our boards. But this is not the case around the nation. A couple of years ago I worked with a Session of a church as they started planning to call a new pastor. They did not have even one male on their Session. It is not unusual for churches to have seventy percent of the adults in worship be women and only thirty percent men.

If you Google men and church a whole host of articles pop up, such as "Why do men hate church" or "Where have all the men gone" or "The Feminization of the Church." There are all kinds of strange theories why men have stayed away from church including some that blame testosterone. But there is clearly no one cause.

In a helpful article from the periodical "The Christian Century", the Presbyterian preaching professor Tom Long writes:

Still, the numbers don't lie. Men are staying away from church. The reasons are undoubtedly complex, but perhaps a clue can be found in a Christian group that attracts men and women in roughly equal numbers: Eastern Orthodoxy. A cynic might say that men are attracted to Orthodoxy because it is conservative, with an all-male clergy, many of them sporting beards. The finding of religion journalist Frederica Mathewes-Green, however, is closer to the truth. She surveyed male adult converts and discovered that Orthodoxy's main appeal is that it's "challenging." One convert said, "Orthodoxy is serious. It is difficult. It is demanding. It is about mercy, but it is also about overcoming myself." Another said that he was sick of "bourgeois, feel-good American Christianity."

Yes, some churchgoers are satisfied with feel-good Christianity, but I think many Christians—women and men—yearn for a more-costly, demanding, life-changing discipleship. Perhaps women are more patient when they don't find it, or more discerning of the deeper cross-bearing opportunities that lie beneath the candied surface. Men take a walk or hang around the church coffeepot talking in jargon about football: another disciplined and costly arena of life in which people sacrifice their bodies and their individual desires for a larger cause that matters to them, at least.

Joseph models for all of us a deep commitment to faith.

A third lesson Jesus teaches all of us is following God's commands does not make our lives any easier. Remember that Joseph was apparently a nice man. He was betrothed to a woman who was pregnant. Joseph knew that the baby was not his. He had been wronged and could have made life miserable for Mary and her baby. But he initially decided to divorce her quietly and move on with his life. All the blame would have fallen on Mary. He could have gone on to live a quiet normal life.

But in his dream, he is told to proceed with marrying Mary and he does. This adds tremendous complexity to his life. The community would have whispered and gossiped and looked down on the cuckold. He would not have had to make a difficult journey to Bethlehem with a very pregnant wife. He would not have had to flee Egypt and live as a refugee. Joseph models for us that loving Jesus does not mean an easy life.

Sometimes people seem to believe that if they put their faith in Jesus all will be easy. They think that faith will guarantee health, wealth and success. Remember Jesus said pick up your cross and follow me. Discipleship does not mean an easy life but it does mean a life of purpose and significance. Joseph went places he could not imagine, did things he could not dream and played a role in Jesus' life that he did not live to see fulfilled. Remember Joseph was dead before Jesus began his earthly ministry. Unlike Mary, Joseph did not experience Jesus teaching, death and resurrection. He played his role without seeing the results.

In his obedience to God's call Joseph becomes a model for all of us. The current Pope Francis said at an audience in 2014:

“St. Joseph’s mission is certainly unique and unrepeatable, as Jesus is absolutely unique. However, in protecting Jesus, in teaching him how to grow in age, wisdom and grace, he is a model for every educator and in particular for every father. ... I ask for you the grace to be ever closer to your children, allow them to grow, but be close, close! They need you, your presence, your closeness, your love. Be, for them, like St. Joseph: protectors of their growth in age, wisdom and grace. Guardians of their path, and educators: walk alongside them.

And it all began **When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.**

Joseph is a model for us of a life
of obedience,
responsibility,
trust,
and faith.

May we live up to the model of Joseph.