

# THE FIRST FAMILY OF CHRISTMAS: JOSEPH

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We have a new administration in this country and there will be new residents in the White House. Here in church these Sundays of Advent, we are looking at the First Family of the new administration under Jesus Christ. We are looking at the First Family that occupied the first Christmas. Jesus had a family and learned from them. We, too, are learning from Jesus' first family of the first Christmas.

Last week we learned that Uncle Zechariah was down to earth and did his best. He wasn't a picture of total faithfulness (who of us is?), but God worked out his plans through him anyway.

Then we also learned about Aunt Elizabeth. She was described as old and barren. Not one or the other, but both. Her life speaks to all that is withered in and around us. In God finding her, she became ... different, wonderfully different. Elizabeth-plus-God had a part and did her part in God's story, and we saw that she did it as one who said, "It's not about me. It's about Mary. It's about *her child*." May we have some of that kind of spirit in us.

We pray. *God, we honor you by listening with our whole being to not only hear, but to live out what you say. You honor us by not being silent, but rather speaking. Bless you. Through Christ, we pray. Amen.*

In the name then of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit these words: Matthew 1:18-25 *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.* <sup>19</sup>*Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

<sup>20</sup>*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do*

*not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

*<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."*

*<sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup>But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.*

The New Testament opens with a dream. Think about that. It begins with a dream. Actually, Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, opens with a record of a family tree. That genealogy is, yes, technical, but it is also like the credits at the beginning of a movie, "Sponsored by," "Produced by," and such. Or at a beginning of a book, "I want to thank all the people who were a part of this effort: my wife, my colleague, my editor."<sup>1</sup>

But once beyond the genealogy and the action begins, it begins with a dream. John the Baptist was born, we noted last week, between two songs in Luke. That's cool. Mary's song recorded and then Zechariah's song recorded, and in between them the account of John the Baptist's birth. Born between two songs and that's cool. And the NT begins with a dream, that's cool too... because dreams are powerful, full of portent...and they lift us.

The dream, of course, is a message as so many of them are and some are very, very special. This is one very special.

A message means there is a message-sender. Hey, pay attention to that. When you're lost in the wilderness and you call

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<sup>1</sup> It also grounds Christ and Christmas in history. This is not a metaphor and it was something planned.

out and there's nothing but silence, ohhhh. But we are not alone in a void without anyone there, without any message. There's a message sender and a message.

And there's a message recipient. His name is Joseph.

Here's some info on Joseph. He was a carpenter. He may have settled his family in Nazareth to be near a new Roman town that was growing up, that growth providing work. Think of how people moved to Titusville to be near all the goings on with NASA getting going? Same type of thing.

When we say carpenter we think of kitchen cabinets or making a table or a dresser. But a carpenter back then was a builder and he would have been everything from the one who logged the tree, to the guy in the saw mill, to the architect, to the construction crew on the job site sinking the posts, bricking the chimney, shingling the roof. In other words, this guy had meaty forearms and calloused hands. He had a lunch box.

Life expectancy was much shorter back then, and it seems Joseph might have died between when Jesus was twelve and thirty years old. He's there when Jesus went missing on a family trip to Jerusalem, and was found in the Temple discussing the Torah with the teachers ... about age twelve. But he doesn't seem to be alive when Jesus was hung on the cross, for why else would Jesus ask the disciple, John, to look after his mother?

In the Roman Catholic tradition Joseph is sometimes depicted as an older widower with children from that previous marriage and this would then allow for Jesus to have siblings and yet have Mary be the perpetual virgin. But we have no evidence of that.

I'd like you to see some slides on Joseph. They give us some feel for his life.

As I looked at them, I started thinking about holding my son for the first time, then I thought of burping him and milky stains on my shoulder, of carrying him like a football, of him pushing his legs up on my lap to stand up, of teething and him gnawing on my knuckle, of him tottering between the furniture, ... Joseph had all these.

With my kids, we had mishaps. Joseph, too. We went on one trip, lots of suitcases, lots of people, got to Salt Lake City and

my son said, “Where’s my suitcase?” When we got back home from the trip, there it was sitting inside the front door right where he left it! Joseph would shake his head knowingly saying, “Well, there was a time we went to Jerusalem and I thought Jesus was ahead of us and we had actually left him behind!” So Joseph was like you and me.

Joseph’s life was different than yours and mine in one way. I dated a gal in college who had had in her young life, not one, but two guys already propose to her. In Joseph’s day and age proposing wasn’t a simple matter. Families were involved, dowry’s given....There was a legally binding engagement period which could only be broken by divorce. In that period, which is the period we find Joseph and Mary in our story, the man and woman lived with their respective families and did not have sex. We may call off an engagement and cancel the order for the wedding announcements, or we may have cohabitation, but not then, not there, not for Mary, not for Joseph.

When I think of Joseph and all these things, I do wonder a thing or two. Maybe you have as well. I wonder what it was like for him to handle the whispers of people; the ones like, “Hmm, married seven months and here’s a baby; you do the math.” And, “I can’t believe he jumped the gun; what was he thinking?” Or if people, really knowing of Joseph’s original dilemma with Mary, that he wasn’t the father, looked at Jesus and in Joseph’s hearing used the word “illegitimate” or worse.<sup>2</sup> “Did you ever want to punch them in the nose, Joseph?” Or, “When you took Mary and the baby to Egypt to protect them, how did you go about learning Egyptian and did you find it difficult.” “I wonder if you experienced depression knowing that you and Mary and Jesus had inadvertently led to Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem?” Or simply, and much more brightly, “Did he need spankings?” And, “How does it feel to be in the first action of the whole New Testament (the dream) and in the first direct speech of the whole New Testament (“Fear not, Joseph.”)?”

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<sup>2</sup> See John 8:41, “*We are not illegitimate children (like some people we know [?]).*”

What can we learn about faith and God from this member of the First Family of Christmas? Let me suggest two things.

First, Joseph teaches us about God and *his way with us*. Joseph doesn't initially know, as we readers do, that Mary is pregnant supernaturally by God's holy plan. We're told this in v. 18, but Joseph not until v. 20. Remember the surprise party where all your friends knew about it, but you didn't? We all know and Joseph initially doesn't. So knowing only what he knows, that she is pregnant and he is not the father, it comes to Joseph to divorce her. He seems to be, like so many, a by-the-book guy and by-the-book meant divorce. He could, justifiably, do it very harshly. He could throw the book at her. He could make it public. He could press for stoning. But he's not going to...because of the kind of young man he is, one who mixes his morality with compassion.

Way, way back in Isaiah, it was said of Joseph's stepson, Jesus, a bruised reed he will not break. That's from Isaiah 42:3. Let me read from vs. 1b to 3b. "He will bring justice to the nations ... a bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness, he will bring forth justice." The reading begins with justice and ends with justice and in the middle justice is explained ... that's what we get from the structure of the verse. And justice is explained, not as legalism, but as truth with love, as not breaking the bruised reed or snuffing out the smoldering wick. That's what justice is ... truth with kindness and respect. And that's who Joseph is! Do you see that Joseph is that way here with Mary?<sup>3</sup>

Hmmm. If we could say that Jesus' learned, which he must have, even though he was God, we might say he learned about messianic justice, truth with love, from Joseph's knee.

Do you know that this is God's way with you, he is just with you, as he is with you in truth and kindness and respect? And once Joseph takes Mary as his wife, pregnant as she is, whatever shame was hurled her way, he took it, too. He shared the pain. He chose to. God asked. He chose. As Joseph was with Mary, so

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<sup>3</sup> Hmm. Knowing who Jesus really is (ie, God ... and if you have seen me, you have seen the Father) we might say not, "Like father, like son," (Joseph/Jesus) but "Like son, like father" (pre-existent Jesus/Joseph)!

Jesus is with you and me. God asked. He chose. We don't understand all the pain in the world, but one thing we know is that Jesus is in it with us. Thank you, Joseph, for showing us the heart of God to us.

Two, Joseph also teaches us about *us with God*. God's way with us and *our way with God*.

Joseph has three dreams from God. Each time he gets up and simply... does... what he was asked to do. John Calvin said, "I offer you my heart, Lord, sincerely and promptly." That was Joseph. No hemming or hawing. No, "Yeah but." It wasn't that he was like a soldier ant impervious to doubts or fears. After all, the angel did say, "Fear not, Joseph."<sup>4</sup> But even so, he got up and did what was asked.

I worked with a man once who said of a person here and there that, "He did yeoman's service"? That means – "performed or rendered in a loyal, valiant, useful, or workman like manner, especially in situations that involved a great deal of effort or labor." You know what? That's Joseph.

Joseph had dreams. Yes, he had the three. But he, as all people do, had some dreams for his life – a simple family, passing on the family business, that sort of thing. Yet when God came, Joseph let God rearrange his dreams. God tends to do that. They got rearranged.

You could say Joseph sacrificed his dreams, if you want to put it that way, to embrace God's. God's were better but still, in a way, Joseph sacrificed his dreams for Mary and Jesus. Our way with God is to let him work his dreams in front of ours.

Joseph shows us by God's grace that even by the book guys and gals, can step up. Joseph shows us how to step up ... sincerely and promptly.

I love this Christmas story and this Christmas family. It's got a cousin who's a little weird, an Uncle who didn't have perfect faith, an aunt who was in the tired part of life, and a young man who, despite the awkwardness he found himself in, took a step of faith and tried to do simply and sincerely what God asked. If they

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<sup>4</sup> I liked Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer saying of a player, 'He doesn't know the meaning of fear. In fact, I looked at his grades this week and there are a lot of words he apparently doesn't know the meaning of.'

can participate in God’s story in their ways, you can in yours, I can in mine, and we can in ours.

Aren’t you glad for the lessons of Christmas from the first family of Christmas? Amen.

Benediction: The text we read ended with, “Joseph named him Jesus.” The father naming in that culture was the father claiming. He was saying, “This is my child.” And this child is Jesus which means “Savior.” I pray this day you will, for the first time or the hundredth time, name and claim Jesus as your Savior.

*If you’d like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors & elders of the church would welcome your call.*

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