

"JOSEPH'S STORY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church.
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 28, 1997**

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INTRODUCTION

Some lines by columnist, David Barry, help to lead us into today's "post-Christmas" sermon. He writes,

"My most vivid childhood memory of Christmas that does not involve opening presents, putting batteries into presents, playing with presents....destroying presents before sundown, is the annual Nativity Pageant of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church up in Armonk, New York..."

He remembers that a Mrs. Elson was the Director and that she would tell the children what role they would play, based on their artistic abilities. For example, if you were short, you would usually get a role as an angel, which involved being a part of the "Heavenly Host" and gazing with adoration on the Christ Child. He goes on to recall even more...

"Shepherd was my favorite role because you always got to carry a stick, plus you spent most of the pageant waiting back in the closet with a rope that led up to the church bell and 750,00 bats! Many were the happy rehearsal hours we shepherds spent back there in the dark, whacking each other with sticks and climbing up the ladder so as to cause bat emission products to rain down upon us..."

After a couple of years as shepherd, you usually did a stint as a Three King. This was not nearly as good a role because you had to lug around the gold, the frankincense and, of course, the myrrh, which God forbid you should drop because they were placed in valuable antique containers belonging to Mrs. Elson.

Nevertheless, being a Three King was far better than being Joseph, since Joseph had to hang around with Mary who was played by a girl! You had to wait backstage with this girl and walk in with this girl. Needless to say, you felt like a total wonk, which was not helped by the fact that the shepherds and three kings were constantly suggesting that you really liked this girl. So, during the pageant, Joseph tended to maintain the maximum available distance from Mary...as though she were carrying around some kind of fatal bacteria."

NO FUN TO PLAY JOSEPH

Dave Barry's on to something...namely this, that it's never been much fun to play Joseph. Joseph appears to be something of an insignificant character in this entire drama of Christmas. Joseph emerges from the shadow of Mary and the baby Jesus. All the attention is on Mary while Joseph hangs around with the shepherds and the smelly animals off to the side. He has no lines to speak. He just stands there with a pretty low profile. Nowhere in the Gospel narrative does Joseph ever get to say a word. Last Sunday we thought about Mary's "song". Today, let's review Joseph's story.

We don't know very much about Joseph other than the fact that he was a carpenter from the small town upstate called Nazareth. Someone has penned this about him,

"At first view there was nothing striking about this man. His simple, well-worn clothes revealed him to be a man of small means....a man of few words, much more apt to show his feelings by arriving at your door with his tool chest to fix that broken stool, that table, or that door latch. This man was a doer, not a talker; he was an unassuming person, who stood patiently in lines...waiting his turn."

What we do know about Joseph is that he was a good man, a solid citizen any community or town would be proud to call its own. And although we might not think of Joseph as a man of great faith...he really was!

Remember that the custom of that day was for families to arrange the marriages of its young people. Often this would involve negotiations with parents, while the children had very little say in whom they would marry. Joseph's family and Mary's family had apparently arranged for the two of them to be married. Being a small town, they had no doubt known each other or seen each other at Hebrew School. With the blessing of their families, the marriage had been carefully arranged. They were formally engaged or "betrothed" to each other. There was a legal bond between them even though they did not live together. And if for some reason either one of them wanted to break of the engagement, a legal divorce was required. Traditionally, the couple would be engaged for one year, and then they would be married. And the whole town would celebrate the marriage of "two" of its very own. And the wedding celebration and feast would last from a few days to a week...perhaps even longer.

Mary and Joseph were excited about getting married. Joseph, I'm sure, just longed for the day when he could take Mary home as his wife. Richard Olson, writing in The Practical Dreamer, says this,

"We can imagine Joseph inventing carpentry errands that took him by Mary's house. We can picture Mary making a wide detour with her water jar on the way to the well at the center of town and walking ever so slowly past the shop where Joseph would be working....."

ONE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED

I picture Joseph as the happiest man in the town. Mary would soon become his wife, but then one day everything seemed to change. Mary had to speak to Joseph. She told him about an angel visiting her who told her that she would have a child who will,

"Be great! And will be called the SON of the MOST HIGH".

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, but he was having a hard time believing Mary's story. I'm sure that this bit of news that Mary was "with child" must have hit Joseph like a ton of bricks. Again, quoting Richard Olson, in The Practical Dreamer...

"Quiet Joseph grew dark with hurt and anger, turned from her, clenched his fists, and skinned his knuckles as he pounded his bench. Mary dissolved into tears, running from his shop. As she left, she blurted out that she had hoped that at least he would understand. And soon she was gone...."

Joseph was left all alone to agonize over how he should handle this problem. As he saw it, he had two choices: either he could set the date of their wedding sooner and hope that family and friends had lost track of the months, or he could simply divorce her. Mary was in grave danger.

If anyone found out that she was pregnant, she would be stoned to death. Joseph really loved Mary and didn't want to see any harm come to her, but he didn't think it was right to marry her either. All day long in his carpenter's shop, he wrestled with his dilemma...planing boards down to "nothing". His nights were sleepless...tossing and turning...wondering and pondering Mary's strange news, thinking how best to solve this problem.

Finally, he came to a decision. He would quietly divorce her in the presence of two witnesses so no harm would come to her. We don't know whether or not Joseph had told Mary of his decision, but he apparently felt that this was the sensible thing to do because he really had such a hard time believing Mary's story.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH DREAMS

Resting today, as we do in the afterglow of Christmas, and the birth of the baby, Jesus, we can and we do acknowledge the possibility that God sometimes speaks to us through our dreams.

God, of course, communicates with us in many ways. It was while Joseph was sleeping that an angel from God spoke to him, saying...

"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary for your wife...for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit". The angel told Joseph that he had responsibility for naming the child JESUS...."For He will save His people from their sins...."

An angel of God spoke to Joseph through a dream (Matthew 1: 20 and 21). I understand that scientists who have studied brain patterns of people sleeping report an "internal storm" of activity when a person is having a dream. In a book entitled, Myth and Dream in Hebrew Scripture, by Dr. John Priest, he helps us to understand the difference between many of the dreams interpreted today and the dreams recorded in the pages of our Bibles. He offers this thought,

"The present pre-occupation with dreams is inwardly oriented....what does the dream reveal about my existence, my life. The Biblical view of the dream is quite otherwise....."

Instead of focusing on our own needs and our own aspirations and concerns, dreams in the Bible revealed God's will or God's plan for the individual. God speaks to us in many ways. The Bible reminds us that one way is through our dreams

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH ANGELS

Joseph's story also serves to remind us that God also speaks to us through angels. Perhaps what was most unbelievable about Mary's story was the visit of an angel. In all of his years, Joseph had never even heard of anyone speaking with an angel, let alone seeing one "face to face".

Angels don't make a habit of visiting humans, or do they.....the former Rector of Heavenly Rest, Hugh Hildesly, told a lovely story about one of his parishioners who is an angel. His name is Phil, and he is a street person, according to Hugh Hildesly. Phil refuses to stay in a shelter. He sleeps in doorways and maintains a careful routine covering this neighborhood in daytime and opening the door of one of our banks, or when the weather is cold, he usually ends up sitting in a church in the neighborhood. Dressed poorly, in rags sometimes...seldom washing...he talks to himself and mutters as he plods along.

But let me tell you more about him and what happened a couple of years ago at Christmas over at Heavenly Rest. One evening of Christmas week, the people of the church were in the back with cookies and coffee when out of the church there rose a magnificent voice, singing "O Holy Night". It was a trained, professional voice, radically beautiful and everyone stopped talking and listened, somewhat awestruck, and then peeked into the sanctuary to see who was there. Hugh Hildesly in sharing this story that made the news, "It was Phil.....and God".

The Bible says somewhere that sometimes we entertain "angels unawares". Maybe Phil was one of those angels. At this time of the year we are reminded to treat every human being with dignity and with love. Oh, it can be so hard, but who knows....."WHO" might be an angel in disguise. To me, this is what is so beautiful about Christmas. All things...all things "become possible!"

BUT THE MOST BEAUTIFUL POSSIBILITY: THE CHANGE THAT TAKES PLACE

But the most

beautiful possibility is the change that takes place in the "Josephs" of our world, for we read in Matthew's Gospel, this word....

"When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took her as his wife!"

Picture, if you will, Joseph now waking up from his dream and rushing over to Mary's home...to her parents. He ran through the streets of Nazareth and when he reached her house he was out of breath. He pounded on the door....his own heart just pounding. Mary's father came and answered the door,

"Joseph...what's matter? It's early...why are you here, banging on our door?" "I have to see Mary!" he says...

And there's Mary...standing behind her father looking at Joseph. Something in his eyes reveals that everything is going to be all right, OK....Joseph now believes her story and is ready....willing and able to take Mary as his wife!

They will live in the back of the little carpenter's shop. He will use some of his spare time to make a cradle for the baby. He would not neglect his wife. He loved her and she would become a part of his family.

And when the census was ordered (which he knew was coming), he would take Mary with him...all the way up to Bethlehem even though she would have and could have stayed at home with her family. But he wanted her with him. And when the time came for Mary to give birth, Joseph was there with her. He named the baby - Jesus, as the angel had instructed him to do.

CLOSING I like to think of Joseph then as an ordinary man....but as a man of extraordinary faith. And such people continue to be the hope of our world - both men and women. Who knows? Perhaps there is a Joseph here this morning....in this congregation.....a doer, not a talker. An unassuming person, who waits patiently in line and then when it's his turn, he or she steps forward and makes a difference. Such people...let's face it... such people lift the level of life for us all!

And this is the kind of response that you and I need to make this morning to this wonderful story of Joseph...and to Mary's song of last Sunday....as have so many people down through the centuries as they have heard the story. It is the response of LOVE...of believing....of believing in the possibility of redemption of all people, for who knows when it just might be an "angel" in disguise. It is listening to the voice of God and believing that "all good things are possible!"

And so dear friend, whoever you might be and by whatever name you are called.....as you prepare to leave Bethlehem's manger this year, may you depart as did the shepherds....glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.....and may you like the WiseMen of this story, return home by a different way.....and may it be for you every day of a new year - the way of love, of faith, of hope, peace and joy!

PRAYER For when the song of the angels is still, and when the star in the sky is gone....and when the Kings and the Princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, THEN, it is for each of us....

"The work of Christmas really beings.
To find the lost and to heal the broken.
To feed the hungry...to release the prisoner.
To rebuild the nations.
And to bring peace among the brothers and sisters,
And - to 'make music in the heart'...."

Amen

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