

Gospel - Matthew 1: 18-24

Advent 4

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Every year in Advent we hear the Magnificat, the story of Jesus' conception from Mary's perspective. But in the gospel this week, we get Joseph's side of the story. Very egalitarian, right? But what do we know about Joseph? Not much, honestly. He does not have a speaking part in the Bible. He appears sparingly in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, once in John and not at all in Mark. In fact, these passages, Matthew 1:18-24, pretty much constitute Joseph's cameo appearance in the Bible.

The apocryphon "The History of Joseph the Carpenter," written in the sixth century, lays out a theory that Joseph was elderly when he and Mary were betrothed, that the history of his relationship with Mary was that of a grandfather figure, that Jesus had siblings but they were all from a previous marriage, and that Joseph died at the ripe old age of 111.

But back to the Bible. There are only 16 direct and indirect references to Joseph in the Bible. We know his lineage traces back to David, which fulfills prophecy, but Matthew and Luke differ on how the lineage worked. From Luke we know Joseph was from Nazareth. Matthew tells us he was betrothed to Mary. Luke explains the trip to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Joseph was a carpenter, according to Matthew, though the Greek word can also be interpreted as an artisan in metal or stone, or even, according to some scholars, as a person knowledgeable about the Torah. The presentation of Jesus at the temple in the gospel according to Luke adds to the impression that Joseph was a devout Jew. Matthew recorded the family's flight to Egypt to avoid the Massacre of the Innocents and both Matthew and Luke mention the family settling in Nazareth. Finally, we infer that Joseph died sometime before Jesus' crucifixion because Jesus gives Mary into John's care, which he would presumably not have done had her husband still been alive.

And that's basically it. A pretty short biography for a man who played a crucial role in Jesus' life.

Or was it a crucial role? I say yes, because in those days if a woman turned up pregnant by someone other than her husband, the punishment was public stoning – or worse. So without Joseph's protection, Mary – and Jesus – may not have survived.

Instead, Joseph determines that he will dismiss Mary quietly so that she won't be disgraced. Though it seems like that plan would get blown to smithereens the minute the BABY is born. Well, once again, we make plans and God laughs, right?

While the Song of Mary has been sung in countless ways over the years, and you'll hear a contemporary version of it later on this morning, the hymns and carols about Joseph are few. One is "The Cherry Tree Carol," first written in the 1500s. That story line features Mary asking Joseph to pick cherries for her and an angry Joseph replying that she should have the father of her baby pick them rather than he. In their Christmas concert this year, Women of Note sang a beautiful arrangement of this carol, and they captured the anger of Joseph perfectly!

If I were Joseph, I would have reacted in anger to the news that my betrothed was pregnant by someone other than me. But we don't know that Joseph was, and since there were no cherries in the Middle East during Biblical times, I'm a little skeptical of the story. Still, anger is a wholly human emotion, and who among us hasn't experienced it when things haven't gone our way?

There is a close relationship between fear and anger, according to most psychologists. In describing that relationship, Bernard Golden in *Psychology Today* says the following: "Fear is most often described as an emotional response that pushes us away from what we currently experience or anticipate experiencing, real or imagined. It may involve both an emotional and physical withdrawal. We may be fearful of external forces as well as those that arise from our inner landscape—our thoughts, feelings, and sensations. In fact, fear of our own emotions is a major contributor to disruptions in our emotional well-being. This is the primary cause of "emotional avoidance" that leads to constriction in emotional flexibility and resilience. Such fear drains our attention and forces us to be guarded—in our thoughts, feelings and behavior—lest we arouse thoughts or feelings that threaten our sense of self.... While fear leads us to feel vulnerable and not in control, anger can be energizing and empowering. As such, it can become the go-to reaction to experiencing fear."

What if Joseph had remained angry, rather than turning when that angel spoke to him in a dream?

Joseph, with the help of God, moved beyond his fear and anger. Perhaps a more complete version of Joseph's story is a carol written by John Rutter in 2020 as a tribute to the Oxford team of scientists that worked on a COVID vaccine. According to Kristina Glickman of Salt & Light Media, Rutter was "inspired to write from Joseph's point of view because, like the scientists and researchers who toil in the background, Joseph is a somewhat shadowy figure whose vital role in the Christmas story – and in salvation history – is often overlooked." The first verse of "Joseph's Carol" goes like this:

Long and weary was the journey,
Hard and dark the road we trod;
Deep enfolded in the stillness of the night
It seemed I heard the voice of God:
'Fear not, Joseph, weep not Mary,
Travel onward through the darkness of night;
Bethlehem will see his glory:

And the chorus:

*Ecce miraculum, (which means, behold a miracle) ecce miraculum
Here in a stable lies your heav'nly King,
Ecce miraculum, ecce miraculum,
Alleluia, alleluia hear the angels sing.*

I've included a link to the carol [here](#).

The words are so poignant because we all have experienced long, weary journeys. From betrothal to shocking news to traveling to Bethlehem with a pregnant woman, to fleeing to Egypt and finally returning to Nazareth where undoubtedly the questions about his baby's parentage persisted, Joseph experienced a long weary journey. You may be experiencing one right now. But if we listen carefully in the stillness of the night, when, let's face it, we're not sleeping anyway because the stress of that journey is weighing on us – if we listen carefully, like Joseph, we will hear the voice of God.

And the first words you may hear are “be not afraid.” The Most Reverend Melissa Skelton, bishop provisional designate for the Diocese of Olympia, points this out in her [Advent Meditation](#) written for “The Other Journal.” She notes that these are words greeting characters throughout the Bible: Abraham, Moses, David, and yes, when the angel Gabriel visits Mary, as well. You’ll often find some version of these words repeated when God is asking people to do difficult, awesome things. No less so for a good Jewish carpenter like Joseph. No less so for you – and me.

In business, we sometimes refer to difficult goals as “BHAGs:” Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals. On that dark, lonesome night when he went to bed intending to dismiss his betrothed, Joseph listened. And instead of following the law or the tradition or the safe route, Joseph set himself a BHAG. He married his betrothed despite the inconvenience of this pregnancy from another, and he offered wife and baby his protection and care.

And so, Skelton suggests: “In these last few days of Advent, a season of the dark, the subterranean, and the mysterious, a season when we need to retrace the stories of new birth and the return of light, may you and I hear a word from that dark place, a word that banishes all fear and encourages us to take one tiny leap of action to draw nearer to something we do not fully understand. Emmanuel is God with us: do not be afraid.”

We are close to the New Year, when resolutions are made and new fervor for growth and change is high. But don’t wait till January 1. Go out. Do audacious things. Listen to heavenly voices. And do not be afraid.

Ecce miraculum.

Amen.