

SERMON: "GOD WITH ... JOSEPH"

TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT GENESIS 39:1-6
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 1:18-25

December 11, 2022
Third Sunday of Advent

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INTRODUCTION

I like manger scenes. We have 8 of them.

One manger scene stays up year round in my office.

That is the picture on the bulletin cover and screen.

Yes, there is a Grinch in my manger scene

This sermon series about God with us and this passage about Joseph got me thinking ... where, in all those manger scenes, is Joseph?

Ann Weems asks the same question in her book, Kneeling in Bethlehem, with a poem called "Getting to the Front of the Stable"

Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?

Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,

and told him to stand at the back of the crèche,

background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?

Joseph does seem an almost forgotten figure, somewhere in the background

Looking around at the manger scenes scattered throughout my house,

I found myself asking 'Is this Joseph ... or is this one of the shepherds?'

What is Joseph's role, not just in the story of Christmas, but the story of Christ and what can followers of Christ today learn from Joseph's example?

Joseph really doesn't have many lines, but his part is critically important.

Writing to a primarily Jewish audience, Matthew wants to be clear

that Jesus is the 'promised one,' the one the people of Israel

have been waiting for. Matthew begins with a genealogy.

Chapter one, verse one ... **An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**

Jesus is the promised son of David through his earthly father, Joseph

That connection has to be made, connecting Jesus to David, to Abraham

in order for the people of Israel to believe he is the One. And he is!

He is through Joseph ... Joseph's lineage. Joseph's legacy.

Joseph through his actions, his choices (like a good step father)

makes that connection. He could have done differently. He thought about it.

WHAT DOES JOSEPH DO?

The stage is set before the angel appears to Joseph in a dream.

And it is a mess. Joseph has got a problem, a big problem.

The man is engaged to be married and finds out that his fiancée,
with whom he has had not sexual relations, is pregnant.

What he is going to do? What is he supposed to do?

According to the law as set forth in Deuteronomy 22, she is to be put to death,
stoned to death. But Joseph, the Bible tells us, decides to take another approach.

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Joseph was going to dismiss her quietly (that is, get an annulment).

I like that about him. He was a gentle man ... a gentleman

He could have made a scene, a self-righteous, self-serving spectacle

He could have made her look bad. But he did not.

I already like him for that reason ... for what he plans to do

and how he plans to do it, quietly

But read on and we find more reason to not only like Joseph,

but learn from his example ... how God was with him and how
he quite intentionally and humbly was with God.

At first, he goes with his definition (based on scripture and tradition) of what is right,

Then after listening to what the angel tells him ... he changes his mind.

"His righteousness gave way to God's" is how one preacher described it

I like that way of saying it. Reminds me again that the word 'self-righteous'
is an oxymoron. Self? Righteous?

That is a lesson worth learning from Joseph. He listened. He learned

He sensed God was with him ... and not just to be with him where he was

"Atta boy, Joe! Keep on doing what you're doing." God was with him

changing directions ... and definitions of what was and is the right thing to do

Joseph picked up on the fact that God was with him

And not as his co-pilot. What a silly bumper sticker that is? God is my co-pilot?

Joseph knew better. He heard what the angel said. He believed

And with his actions and change of course, he responded

Saying in his own way, "Okay, God, you drive!"

HOW ABOUT YOU?

The preacher I mentioned earlier summarizes the story of Joseph this way.

The heart of the story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and who decides to believe that God is present in it. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a cleaner, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife, Joseph does not do that. He owns the mess - he legitimates it – and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine

Joseph listened and learned and then did things differently.

You ever do that? Listen and let your mind, your heart
and your plans be changed by God's ever so busy Holy Spirit?

Takes humility and openness to do that. Listen and learn and change

I pray God gives me, gives us, the courage to follow Joseph's lead
To be open to God changing our definitions and directions

I've seen what happens when we get too set in our ways

when our definitions of what's right and who's wrong, get in the way.

I've seen it in the mirror ... and seen it in church meetings.

I may have told you about being the chair of the examinations committee

for the presbytery in North Carolina. It is that committee's job to meet

with pastors who might be called to serve in that area and make sure

their theological beliefs fit in the big tent that is the Presbyterian Church USA

The exams are done through conversation, asking questions. Most everyone passes.

In my nine years there, we failed two people (which was a lot really)

One experience sticks out. This man gave us a statement of faith as required.

We noted several problems – very sexist, very anti-Catholic

We asked if he might want to update his statement. He took offense

He raised his voice saying "I've had this same statement of faith for 25 years.

I see no reason to change it now!" I took my glasses off, rubbed my head

(that's what I do when frustrated ... could be what happened to all my hair).

I didn't want to react to one raised voice with another. I took my time.

A wise member of the committee, a man twenty years older than me

(about the same age as the man we were examining) spoke up and asked

"So are you telling us that God has not changed you mind or heart

about anything relative to your faith in two dozen plus years?"

SUMMARY

The other man spoke up, still loud and proud. "That's right!" he said.

To which my colleague responded with an even lower voice,
saying, "I cannot tell you how very sad that makes me."

How about you? Might I ask the same question my friend asked
and change it up a bit looking for a better answer than the one he got.
How and when has God changed your mind or heart
about your faith, about anything, in the last however many years?"

Joseph did change his mind and his plans. God changed Joseph.
Maybe we too could let God change our minds, our hearts, our plans.
That is what Joseph did. That is his example, his place.

The poet I mentioned at the beginning tells Joseph's story
of his place in the story, in history ... and in the manger
Let me end then with that poem, with how the poem begins

*Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?
Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,
and told him to stand at the back of the crèche,
background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?*

And with how the poem ends

*This Christmas, let us give thanks to God
for this man of incredible faith
into whose care God places the Christ Child.
As a gesture of gratitude,
let's put Joseph in the front of the stable
where he can guard and greet
and cast an occasional glance
at this Child who brought us life.*