

"Just Joseph."

Isa. 7:10-16; Ps.80:1-7, 17-19; Mt. 1:18-25

Rev. David E. Young

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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I think all of us want to do the right thing. We want to be thought of as righteous, God-fearing and good people. We'd like to be considered "just" in what we do. And we want guidance in how to be "good".

Much of the guidance we receive comes from the Bible. That is nothing new. People in every age have looked to Holy Scripture for guidance and revelation.

Matthew's community, the audience for his Gospel, was filled with Christians of Jewish background. They were raised to obey the Law. Now, with their new-found faith in Christ Jesus and the law of Love, they want to do the right thing, but they aren't exactly sure what the right thing really is.

Maybe it is in answer to this question that Matthew gives them and us a picture of . . . Joseph.

The Bible tells us very little about Joseph. He never speaks. One of the things we do learn about Joseph from Matthew's Gospel is that he was a just man, a righteous and God-fearing man.

We don't get any information about what his life was like before he met Mary. We don't know whether he felt he was destined for greatness or mere mediocrity. I wonder how Joseph thought about his life before he met Mary.

The traditions of the church hold that Joseph was probably quite a bit older than Mary. We don't know how they met or how the betrothal came to be arranged. We don't know how long they were an "item" in Nazareth. At the very least it is fair to say that, even before the angels showed up they were both imagining what their future would be like now that they were betrothed and promised to each other.

But now, suddenly, there is news that rocks their world. Mary is pregnant. Joseph knows he had nothing to do with it. The child is not his. Mary has violated the betrothal agreement.

What is he going to do? What would a righteous and just Jew do? This is adultery, and the Jewish law is pretty clear on the punishment. A righteous Jew should follow the Law of Moses. A woman in Mary's position should be hauled before the Elders and denounced. She might be stoned.

This is what a "righteous" man, a "just" Jew ought to do.

But Matthew tells us much about Joseph in a few words. Joseph, being a just man, decides instead to divorce Mary quietly and hopefully save her from a public scandal. He doesn't want Mary to be harmed or humiliated. Already he is showing us that being "just" and acting "righteously" means more than just taking the word of God and applying it to every situation without regard for kindness and mercy. (I wish that religious fanatics around the world might learn something from Joseph the Just!)

Matthew shows us through Joseph what it means to blend the righteousness and justice of the Law with the mercy and compassion of Love. Matthew also reminds us that sticking to our guns isn't always the most faithful, the most grace-filled course of action.

We see this quality of Joseph's character in the fact that the angel speaks to Joseph after he's already made up his mind. The guidance from God comes when Joseph has already decided what to do. He is willing to change course, and to do so based merely on a dream!

Joseph is clearly a man of strong faith and character, willing to protect Mary's reputation at the expense of his own, willing to be looked down upon, talked about, laughed at. And he was willing to do all of this for the sake of an angel's word in a dream, and for the love he had for Mary and the unborn Jesus.

Joseph is obedient to God to the extreme.

He's being asked to hang in there and adopt this child as his own and bring it into the household of King David, and he does. He becomes, as Craig Shirley puts it, The Guardian of God.

Joseph is the one who will secure Mary's safety during her pregnancy. He will take his family to Egypt out of harm's way. Joseph will then listen again to God's voice and journey north to Nazareth and establish the family home.

It is there that Jesus would grow and mature, and take up the family business. And by "family business" I'm not thinking of carpentry. Jesus' business is his heavenly Father's business of saving and redeeming his people - you and me - from their sins.

It was due, in large part, to Joseph's willingness to be obedient to God and to persevere in spite of adversity and challenge that we have a Christmas to celebrate.

Because his understanding of justice and righteousness was more than rote repetition or slavish execution of the Law, we have a story to tell.

So, we might want to remember, every time we see a depiction of the holy family that only shows "mother and child" that "father and mother, and child" - an earthly trinity, if you will - was necessary for God's redeeming love in Christ to be made manifest to the world.

Joseph was willing to follow the strange and unexpected movements of God in Jesus Christ wherever that led and he did so with quiet courage and strength. May we be willing to follow God's leading as well as we seek to walk in faith, journeying to the manger and then into this fast approaching New Year.

Amen.

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