

PUTTING JOSEPH IN THE MANGER SCENE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When my family decorated our Christmas tree and house when I was a kid, my job was to set up the manger scene. Each year I would carefully unwrap each figure and carefully place the figures just right in the cardboard stable. I don't know when my mom and dad bought the creche scene, but by the time I was given the job of setting it up, it was already looking kind of worn. The orangish-pink cow was missing an ear. The cardboard stable was sagging in several places and was stapled together. Still, I loved setting up that manger scene. I even drew a picture of the scene and wrote "Manger Scene and People" on the box it was packed in.

When my mom sold her house and downsized, she passed the manger scene on to me. For several years, when Nancy and I decorated for Christmas, I would pull out the "Manger Scene and People" box and carefully set up the figures. Finally, after a number of years, I sadly had to admit that it was time to retire my childhood manger scene.

In 1994, Nancy and I bought twelve pecan resin manger scene figurines to paint. The whole crew was present: Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, three wise men, two shepherds, a camel, a sheep, a cow, and a donkey. We had a good time deciding what colors to use for each character. and what expressions to put on their faces. I still enjoy unwrapping the figures each year and arranging them in the living room fireplace. Last week, as we were decorating the house, I carefully unwrapped each figure. When I unwrapped Joseph, I realized (once again — I forget every year!) that Joseph is the only unfinished figure. His brown robe and green cloak are painted, but his feet, hands, face, and head covering are still the light tan color of the pecan resin. Also, poor Joseph has something of a blank stare, almost as if he is anonymous. I don't remember why Joseph didn't get finished. My hunch is it's because Natalie arrived in our family in August 1994, and with two children in the house, any spare time for painting figurines was suddenly gone!

Nancy and I weren't making any sort of theological statement by leaving Joseph unfinished. However, in early versions of creche scenes, Joseph is often left out or, if he happens to be present, he is in the background. In fact, in very many early manger scenes, Joseph is depicted as turned away from the baby Jesus and/or with a frown on his face — so much so that he is sometimes referred to as "grumpy Joseph."

In one particular religious icon of the Nativity, the focus is on the baby Jesus and his mother, Mary. Interestingly, Mary is not looking at her newborn son. Instead, she is turned away and looking at Joseph, who is seated in the lower left-hand corner. Joseph's head is bowed and he rests his cheek on his left hand. He is talking with Sa-

tan, who is disguised as an old shepherd. The suggestion is that Satan is trying to sow more doubts in Joseph's mind about what is taking place.

One description of this icon of the Nativity says, "The posture of St. Joseph is one of doubt and inner trouble, for he wondered if it might be possible that the conception and birth were not by some secret human union . . . Mary is shown larger than any of the other figures, reclining on a mat, and looking not at her new-born Son, but rather with love and compassion towards her spouse, St. Joseph the Betrothed, seeing his affliction and bewilderment over this most strange and divine birth."¹

Far be it from me to criticize or correct iconic religious art, but that particular picture of Joseph seems out of order. If Joseph had any misgivings and questions about what was happening with Mary being pregnant, it was **before** Mary had borne a son. And, honestly, who can blame Joseph if he did have misgivings and questions about what was happening with Mary? My Bible translation says "Mary had been engaged to Joseph" when "she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." The King James Version reads, "was espoused to Joseph." That "engagement" was different from what we think of as an engagement. Mary and Joseph's "engagement" would have been arranged by their parents. Even though they each lived with their parents until they were married, they were pledged to one another legally. Mary's unexpected pregnancy was a crisis, to say the least.

What would the neighbors think? If a young, betrothed woman suddenly turns up pregnant, there are only two possibilities: either she had slept with the man to whom she was betrothed or she had slept with another man. Joseph knew the first wasn't true, which meant the second must be. So, Joseph was justified in seeking a divorce from Mary. In fact, Joseph would have been justified in seeking more than a divorce. He could have publicly shamed and humiliated Mary. He could have sought her death for her apparent adultery. Maybe there were some people in the village who thought that's exactly what Joseph should have done.

That's when Joseph was probably sitting on a rock with his head in his hands, talking with Satan who was planting seeds of doubt in Joseph's mind. But Matthew tells us something very important about Joseph, even though we don't know very much at all about Jesus' earthly father. Matthew 1:19 says, "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

At the Presbyterian Men's Christmas dinner at the Rose Hill Restaurant a couple of weeks ago, Rev. Bill Goodnight read Matthew's Christmas story and then made a profound statement. Bill said about Joseph, "He was a righteous man, but he was not a legalist." In other words, Joseph wanted to do the right thing in a difficult situation — the right thing for himself, the right thing for Mary, the right thing for God. On the one hand, Joseph's "righteousness" could have been measured by how faithful he was to the letter of the law when he found out Mary was pregnant. On the other hand, Joseph's "righteousness" was not defined by following the rules and toeing the line, but was

tempered by mercy. So, Joseph planned to meet the minimum requirements of the law — he planned to dismiss Mary quietly.

Then Joseph had a dream, and the angel of the Lord 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.” You would think that would take care of it — a word directly from the Lord through his angel messenger. Yet, Joseph is being asked to trust God’s Word that seems to go against everything Joseph has been taught and believed. Joseph is being asked to trust God and to step out in faith on a journey that can’t have been easy.

One preacher says this about Joseph (and us), “I might be able to muster the courage necessary to defy society’s expectations in order to do the right thing. I might be able to act in faith to seek God’s will, to look at scripture and to pray that God’s will be done. I might have trust enough to believe that whatever situation God has presented me with will turn out well, and for the good, not just for myself, and maybe not even for myself at all, but for the common good. I wonder at Joseph’s response, and I wonder if I could be like him. I wonder at Joseph’s love — his love for Mary, his love for his adopted son, and his love for God. . . What scene could ever convey the Christmas story, and in particular, the faith of Joseph throughout the year? Imagine seeing the nativity as Joseph does, seeing through lenses of courage and faith and trust. That’s how God calls us to see the world, and our daily lives, and the events that surround us and confound us and overwhelm us and awe us. We are to be Josephs in this world — people of courage and faith and trust and love. People who are willing to suspend disbelief about what God is doing in our very midst this day.”²

There is a story about a children’s Christmas pageant that encountered a crisis at the last minute. As the children were putting on their costumes in the Fellowship Hall, the assistant director ran out of the room in a panic, crying, “We have no Joseph! We have no Joseph!” Then she calmed down enough to explain that the little boy who was supposed to be Joseph had developed a bad case of nausea right before he left his house (sounds like he might have been trying to get out of being in the pageant!). Very calmly, the pageant director came up with a solution, “Well, let a shepherd stand a little closer to the manger with Mary. Nobody will notice Joseph’s absence. He has no speaking part in the story.”³

It’s easy to overlook Joseph in the manger, even in the whole Christmas story. In Luke’s Christmas story, Mary has all of the speaking parts, especially before the baby is born, when she sings praises to God and says, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

A quick review of Christmas hymns in our *Glory to God* hymnal shows a distinct bias toward Mary:

- * “To you this night is born a child of Mary, chosen and virgin mild”
- * “For Christ is born of Mary . . .”
- * ““round yon virgin mother and child!”
- * “The virgin’s tender arms enfolding, warm and safe the child are holding”

* “Isaiah ’twas foretold it, the rose I have in mind; with Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.”

* “That boy-child of Mary was born in a stable, a manger his cradle in Bethlehem”

* “Once in royal David’s city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed: Mary was that mother mild; Jesus Christ, her little child”

* “Gentle Mary laid her child lowly in a manger”

It’s true — Joseph doesn’t say a word in Matthew’s Christmas story. But what Joseph does, in faithful response to the Lord’s message through his angel, speaks just as clearly and loudly as Mary saying, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Obviously, if we didn’t have Mary and the baby Jesus in the manger scene, we wouldn’t have much of a Christmas story. But let’s not be so quick to say with that pageant director, “Nobody will notice Joseph’s absence.”

It’s time we put Joseph in the manger scene — not just in our Christmas pageants and creche scene decorations, but in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Another preacher has put it this way: “[Joseph] was an ordinary man trying his best to listen to God. And his willingness to serve God turned out to be enough: he had a role to play in the larger drama of salvation. . . Joseph did not refuse to do ‘the something’ that he could do, and so Jesus the Messiah was born and life was changed forever. What helps you to listen deeply to the voice of love that is speaking within *you*? What is love calling *you* to do or say? With Joseph beside us to encourage us and give us strength, perhaps we too will respond and will follow where love leads. Perhaps we too will stand with Joseph in that Bethlehem stable, gazing at the newborn Jesus and marveling at the ways of God.”⁴

Maybe it’s time to get out the paintbrushes and paint and finish painting Joseph, so we can put a complete Joseph in the manger scene where he belongs.

Let us pray: In the midst of darkness, O God, you bring a new light. In the midst of confusion and fear, O God, you bring hope and peace. In the midst of strife and stress, O God, you comfort us. O God, you truly love us and bring us new life in Jesus Christ. We praise you. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Explanation of the Nativity Icon,” January 6, 2010, Church of the Nativity at www.churchofthenativity.net.

² Rev. Beth Neel, “Nativity,” December 22, 2013 at www.westprespdx.org.

³ Rev. Dr. Joanna Seibert, “Joseph’s Part in the Christmas Pageant,” December 22, 2013 at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, North Little Rock, AK at www.stlukeepiscopal.org.

⁴ Rev. Margaret Bulitt-Jones, “Another look at Joseph,” at St. John’s Church, Ashfield, MA, December 22, 2013 at www.revivingcreation.org.