

Hidden Figures: Joseph (Advent 3)

Matthew 1:18-25

December 15, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

Today's hidden figure of the Christmas story is Joseph. You may think, well he's not very mysterious, compared to John the Baptist and that long list of names in last week's genealogy. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus and his ministry. Matthew's genealogy tells us where Jesus came from, who his people are, warts and all. Joseph appears at the end of that genealogy, and in Matthew's telling of the birth story, Joseph is prominent. Everybody has at least *heard* of Joseph, so how can he be a hidden figure?

Joseph is right there in our manger scenes, standing by Mary's side. Unless someone has mixed him up with one of the shepherds, which can happen. Sometimes Joseph is depicted as a man who is much older than Mary—this tradition comes from stories about Jesus's birth that are not in the gospels but circulated around early in the Christian tradition. Frequently Joseph is holding a lantern, which I've been trying to figure out for years. In the 1300's, a saint in Sweden had a vision of Joseph holding a candle, so some nativities from that time frame include a candle. Later, it almost always is a lantern but there doesn't seem to be any symbolic value to the lantern, other than to light the room. Essentially, Joseph is reduced in these depictions to a lampstand.

Maybe I'm exaggerating a little, but Joseph does tend toward being a piece of furniture in our retellings of the Christmas story. We tend to favor Luke's version, which highlights Mary. I think Charlie Brown's Christmas special may be as responsible for this as anything, because the story that Linus narrates is Luke's. Joseph has this one starring role at the beginning of the Gospel and then sort of disappears. The only other mention of him in Matthew, is when Jesus is preaching in his hometown of Nazareth, the people are unhappy with him, and they insult him by saying, "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" It's a similar situation in the other Gospels: Jesus is occasionally described as "Joseph's son," but Joseph himself doesn't appear or have any sort of role later in Jesus's life like we see from Mary.

Suffice it to say that Joseph is a secondary character in the Christmas story, hidden in the shadows cast by the spotlight on the baby Jesus and, to a lesser extent, on Mary.

Joseph is in a delicate dilemma. There are no good answers to his problem. Set aside everything you already know about what is about to happen and how it is

going to come to pass, and put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a minute. He and Mary are betrothed. That was a little more formal than we think of "being engaged." It was a legally binding contract, with marriage as the end. To end an engagement would have required legal action. So he and Mary are betrothed, all-but-married, and she is pregnant. Matthew tells *us* that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but Joseph doesn't know that, and I think we can understand that he puts the blame on someone more human.

Matthew makes sure to tell us that Joseph is a righteous man. "Righteous," as Matthew will make clear in the rest of his Gospel, does not mean "kind" but means living correctly and justly, without hypocrisy, practicing what you preach, and treating others as if they were Christ himself. Righteousness is complicated and something the rest of us might work toward, but Joseph had already reached. Being righteous meant that in this case, Joseph decided he would dismiss Mary as quietly as he could, to avoid bringing her to public disgrace. "Dismiss" means that he will still have to take legal action to break the betrothal contract he had with her father. No matter what he does, he can't sweep this under the rug completely. Adultery was against the law, with a strong prescribed punishment. Joseph is a righteous man and bound to follow that law. Dismissing Mary as quietly as he can allows him to follow the law regarding breaking a betrothal contract and allows him to avoid the consequences of Mary being accused of adultery. He's following one law in order to circumvent another. It seems to him, I imagine, the best of two bad options.

Maybe you've been in a similar fix, where you seem to have two bad choices, neither of which you want to do, both of which are hard and complicated and will result in hurt feelings and negative consequences. There seems no good way to turn, and we often just grit our teeth, choose the least bad option, and suffer whatever consequences come our way. Sometimes those consequences last for years, and sometimes we second-guess ourselves, and sometimes our bad options turn out exactly as bad as we thought they would. I suspect this is what Joseph expected the rest of his life to look like, and especially the rest of Mary's life to look like.

Joseph had made his decision. It was done and dusted. Matthew says he had "resolved" to break off ties with Mary. He was prepared to live with it, come what may. And he really believed he was being righteous, was being obedient to what his religion expected him to do in such a situation, and being as considerate as he could of Mary. So not only was he resolved in his own mind, but had some religious backing for what he had chosen to do.

But Joseph had not, could not, would not, have ever imagined the third option that appeared through an angel in a dream. The angel said to him, “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 had made the wrong decision, because he had been working under the wrong assumptions. Assumptions which seem completely reasonable and thought through and logical, but ended up being completely wrong. There was not adultery on Mary’s part, so the law had not been broken, so there was no need to dismiss Mary at all. There had been no need for the agonizing decision making that Joseph had been subjecting himself to. But of course he had no way of knowing that. Having just described it all like that, I think if I were Joseph, I might have been a little annoyed at the angel for poor timing of this revelation.

The angel informs Joseph that the child is from the Holy Spirit. Again, I’m sure this was more than a little bewildering to poor Joseph. What in the world did *that* mean, anyway? But the angel said, “don’t be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. This baby’s name will be Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

And with no more information or explanation than that, Joseph abandons what he had resolved to do and obeys what the angel tells him to do. He is a forerunner for the disciples, who dropped their nets to follow Jesus. Joseph does what the angel says, does what God calls him to do, even though it seems like the opposite of what he thought he should do, even though God’s calling seems to be based on ridiculously illogical and impossible information. He has no further questions. He takes Mary as his wife, she has the baby, Joseph names his new son Jesus, because Jesus’s name means “he will save.”

We all have decisions that come to us, where there doesn’t seem to be a right way to go, where there aren’t any easy answers, where all of the options we can think of seem terrible. But even if our decision is to avoid making a decision, we end up deciding one thing or another.

And maybe I’m particularly stubborn, but when I have finally made up my mind, especially if it was a hard decision, I’m not likely to want to change and go a different direction. My kids will tell you that much. It’s not easy to change mom’s mind.

But what if we looked to Joseph for some wisdom here. Joseph faced a hard decision. He made up his mind to do what was best for his religious convictions, as well as what was best for everyone involved, as best he could. But he didn’t completely close his mind or shut the book on that decision.

When something beyond his imagining, a third option, popped up, he didn't question this new idea, because it was clear to him that it came from God. This third option offered a new way of living, a different way of understanding what he thought he knew about his situation, and he must have instantly recognized that new way as coming from God.

Sometimes new ways of thinking and understanding our lives come to us through angels in our dreams. Maybe not often. Sometimes new ways come to us through prayer. Or through talking things through with a friend or advisor or family member.

What Joseph would encourage us to do, from his place back in the corner with his lantern, is to be open to God's speaking to us, showing us another way from an unexpected direction and through a surprising messenger.

I'd like to close with a prayer by an American monk named Thomas Merton. I think I've shared it with you before, but it seems like a prayer that Joseph could have prayed. *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."*