



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“DARE TO DREAM”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

*This sermon was preached by Rev. Maggie F. Beamguard on Sunday, November 27, 2016
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

The story is told by John Buchanan, the retired pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, about four-year-old Megan, who drew a picture of the nativity. When she completed the work, she explained each of the characters to her mother: shepherds and sheep, three wise men and their camels and exotic gifts, the stable with cows and a cat and a dog and the manger and, of course, Mary and the baby. “Where’s Joseph?” asked Megan’s mother. “Who needs Joseph?” replied Megan.¹

Who needs Joseph? The fact is, Matthew is the only gospel writer to tell Joseph’s side of the story and he does it in only two chapters. And in that story Joseph speaks not one word. If you check the entries under the letter “J” in your New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, “you will find Joseph listed in this way: *‘Joseph, the husband of the mother of Jesus.’*”²

What do we do with Joseph? I’m not the first person to observe that our hymn writers appear reluctant to mention him.³ Much music is written about Mary:

What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin, mother and child...

Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella!
Bring a torch to the cradle and run!
It is Jesus, good folk of the village,
Christ is born and Mary’s calling.
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is the mother!
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is her son!

We are hard pressed to find a song about Joseph.

I was delighted to discover one on an album of winter music released a few years ago by that great church musician Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner, better known as “Sting.” It is called *The Cherry Tree Carol*. The words of the old English carol date back many centuries and describe a scene where Joseph and Mary are walking in a garden when Mary, great with child, asks Joseph to pick some cherries for her. In anger he flies at

¹ As told by James S. Lowry in *Low Back Ladder Back Chair*, p.33

² Kimberly C. Richter, “The Advent Texts: Glorious Visions, Dogged Discipleship” *Journal for Preachers* Vol. 28 No. 1 Advent 2004, p 3-10.

³ Theodore J. Wardlaw “Preaching the Advent Texts” *Journal for Preachers* Vol. 31 No. 1 Advent 2007, p 3-10. AND Martin B. Copenhaver “Jesus’ Other Parent” *Journal for Preachers* Vol. 31 no 1 Advent 2007, p 34-36.

her and says passive-aggressively, “Let the father of the Baby gather cherries for you.” And as the carol goes, Jesus then issues a command from Mary’s womb that the tree bow to the ground for her so she can gather her own cherries. Ouch. Who needs Joseph?

The Holy Spirit has rendered Joseph unnecessary in a way that we don’t quite understand. He does tie Jesus by adoption to the lineage of David, but other than that, he is a bystander.

How many of you have put up your manger scene only to wonder days later if you got Joseph mixed up with a shepherd? It is hard to know where he belongs in the story.

All we have is what Matthew tells us. Joseph is a righteous man. This is a huge compliment. It means that you are a person who knows the Holy Scriptures and lives according to the law.

And Joseph is good and just and he is engaged to be married. He does everything by the book. Everything is swell. And then the rug is pulled out from under him. His fiancé: pregnant. His name: disgraced. His hopes for the future, his dreams: shattered.⁴ This is not how he dreamed his life would turn out. So he faces some decisions about this impending marriage, about Mary, about this baby.

Because he is a righteous man, and he is therefore a man of the law and a man of honor, he knows there are but two options before him: one, cast out Mary in disgrace knowing that she and her child would live as outcasts, begging or stealing to survive, or two, have her stoned to death for her apparent infidelity at the city gate. Both options are legal channels for a righteous person to pursue.

“On the one hand the law. On the other hand Mary and the child . . . “ What a nightmare. Joseph paces the floor. He tosses in his sleep.⁵ “Joseph has a problem.” preaches Tom Long. “Is he going to be righteous? Or is he going to be righteous?”⁶

He finally comes to his decision to divorce her quietly, to send her away. With the decision made, finally he can sleep. And as he sleeps, he dreams. He dreams a wild dream. An angel brings God’s dream for all humankind to Joseph where it is planted in his deep subconscious. “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...” speaks the angel as Joseph’s hand twitches. “The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,” as Joseph’s eyes move rapidly under shut lids. “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins,” comes the voice as Joseph cries in his sleep.

And when he wakes, this good, righteous, color-inside the lines guy⁷ does the most remarkable thing. When he wakes from sleep, he does as the angel of the Lord commands him. The rule-abider said, “To heck with the rules as we know them. God is doing something new. I’m not going to stand in the way. I’m going to take part.”

Martin Copenhaver remarks: “Somehow, in the stillness of the night, in the darkest hours, in that death-like state called sleep, Joseph is able to let go of his own dreams in order to dream God’s dreams for the world. No wonder Matthew seems to have a particular fondness for Joseph. Here is a righteous man who surveys a mess he has absolutely nothing to do with creating and decides to believe that God is present in it. With every

⁴ Copenhaver, 35.

⁵ Richter, 9.

⁶ Tom Long, in a recording of a sermon.

⁷ Wardlaw, 9.

reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a newer, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife, Joseph does not do that. He claims the scandal, he owns the mess - he legitimizes it – and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born.”⁸

There are messy times in our lives and times when the world seems to be in total chaos. Right now, in fact, with the political machinery churning; and white supremacists making noise and pumping fists; and the continuing threat of ISIS, and the ongoing refugee crisis; and the glorification of violence within our culture; and the tragedy of children who never make it home from school; and the daily difficulties we face just getting along with those around us; and the pain and grief we know that those close to us experience – right now, preparing to celebrate the birth of the Christ child among us in our regular ways, feels incongruous. Life is not turning out how we dreamed it might. Our celebrations echo in chambers of chaos. The world is messy. Our lives are messy. Shouldn't we get things sorted out and in order before Jesus comes?

It seems to me that these are the times when it takes the faith of Joseph to believe what the angels “endeavor to tell us in our dreams, that God is still with us, that God is struggling to be born, not just in spite of the mess, but in some way through it, in ways that are hard for us to imagine.”⁹

There are others in the Christmas story who more easily attract our attention: Mary for one, the startled shepherds, the choirs of angels, the exotic wise men and their peculiar gifts. But standing aside to let the whole thing happen is Joseph. He is a bystander, but I tremble to think of how the story may have unfolded if he had gotten in the way.

Dear Joseph: Dreamer of Dreams, why haven't we written more songs for you?

There exists a rare picture of Joseph in a Book of Hours created in France in the Middle Ages. A copy is on the front of today's worship bulletin. For once, Joseph is shown in the foreground, and he is holding the newborn Jesus on his lap, the son entrusted to his care. “They lean their heads close toward one another as the donkey and the ox—those animals of the manger who appear in every medieval depiction of Jesus' arrival—look on. In the background, spent from her labor, Mary is in bed, happily reading a book.” And thus Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus become history's most famous blended family.

This picture reminds me of one of my early experiences here at First (Scots). I was at the family Christmas Eve service, where the children and youth act out the nativity. Usually Mary sits beatific holding the baby while Joseph sits solemnly beside her. On this particular occasion, Joseph, played by Hamilton Gehlken, reached for the baby from Mary. In an act of tenderness, he held and bounced the baby doll standing in for Jesus. He looked at him admiringly and with pride. I'd never, in all of my years seen Joseph portrayed as such a compassionate and loving father.

Who needs Joseph? We do.

If he had stuck with convention, if he had played by the rules, Joseph would have ended the whole endeavor before it began. And he would have been, righteous. But just as God chose Mary to bear the Word made flesh into the World, God chose Joseph to dream. And he became the first to live the dream, standing aside to welcome him in an act of radical hospitality. And it changed everything: not death, but life; not condemnation, but grace; not broken bonds, but relationship; not exclusion, but embrace.

⁸ Copenhaver, 35.

⁹ Copenhaver 36.

We often are told to think of the Season of Advent as a time of waiting and preparation. But let us also dream. In these days of chaos and mess, Joseph invites us to become a part of God's dream for the world, welcoming the love of God to earth come down.

Joseph is proof that to make way for Christ, God needs dreamers. In this chaotic, messy and hurting world God needs people to believe and pursue unlikely outcomes: where the wolf lies with the lamb; where they will not hurt or destroy; where a little child leads.

God needs people to believe and to pursue God's dream for the world where hope is the default and not despair; where peace is anticipated and not maligned; where joy breaks through cracks in sadness; where love is freely given to all.

This Advent, with acts of love and expressions of kindness, let us dare to live God's radical dream.

God of mystery, our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is advanced; the day is at hand. Stir us from slumber and let us live as those who have awakened from your dreams. Amen.