

“The Forgotten Player in the Christmas Drama”

Matthew 1:18-25

By John Gill

This afternoon at 4 p.m., our music ministry will present our Christmas Concert, followed by a baked potato dinner – and we hope you will join us. Then, next Sunday morning, we will hold our Christmas Cantata. Of course, the climax of our Christmas season is Christmas Eve. WE will be holding two similar services. Both services will include wonderful Christmas music, a Christmas message, and Holy Communion. However, the lighting of candles will only take place at our 7 p.m. service. I hope you are planning to be here, and that you will invite all your neighbors, especially if they don't have a church home, to join you for Christmas Eve. Both services will be beautiful!

In one of my congregations, our earlier Christmas Eve service was a child-friendly service, we called, “Come to the Stable.” One the things I especially loved about that service was that we encouraged children to come to worship dressed in a costume as a character from the Christmas story, or an animal that might have been in the stable that night. As we would retell the story, it was so sweet to see the kids come up front to take their place in the manger scene we had set up in the sanctuary – three Mary's, five kings, and a host of angels, shepherds, sheep, cows, and assorted other animals. No matter how many of each character we had, they would all take their place at the manger. It was really quite charming.

We did that service for four or five years, and it seemed that every year, we would have a little crisis just before the service began. As we took inventory of all the characters that were represented in the congregation, invariably we come the realization that we would be missing a JOSEPH. We would have to convince a shepherd to be Joseph, or if no one was willing, to draft a middle school boy to take that role when we get to his part in the story. It was a little sad to realize how easily Joseph would be overlooked.

Poor Joseph – standing in the shadows of the crèche, so far out of the spotlight that we forget he's there. We include him in our manger scenes and Christmas pageants as almost an afterthought – someone who wouldn't really be missed if we failed to cast his role. Instead of a lead actor, Joseph is considered a bit part.

But this morning, I want us to rectify that oversight. I want us to turn our attention away from Mary for a moment and consider the role Joseph played in the story of Jesus' birth and in shaping who Jesus became as a man. Because, as important as mothers are in making us who we are, fathers also have a vital role to play. I believe that Jesus was the man he was because he was blessed to have two father-figures: His heavenly Father, and this noble man who raised him as his own.

In the 13th chapter of Matthew, there is the story of when Jesus preached in his home-town synagogue in Nazareth. People were at once amazed and perplexed at this boy – now man – that he could preach with such authority. And so they asked one another, “Where did he get

such wisdom? And what about his miracles? Isn't he the carpenter's son? Isn't this Joseph's boy?"

The people there that day could sense that the young man, Jesus, was no ordinary man . . . he had extraordinary gifts of healing and possessed a wisdom far beyond his years. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? How could he be the Son of God?"

As we approach Christmas, you and I are likely to be struggling with the same question: "Whose son is Jesus, anyway? Is he Joseph's son --- or is he God's Son? Which is it?"

The people of Nazareth concluded that Jesus was only the son of a carpenter, so they rejected his ministry, and Jesus left, saddened that his own neighbors could not accept him.

But the same issue has confronted the Christian Church, as well: "Whose son is Jesus, anyway?" Unfortunately, the church has often implied that, to answer this question, you have to say one-or-the-other, putting God and Joseph in competition with each other – that, either Joseph is Jesus' father, or that God is Jesus' father.

Now, the Bible is very clear that Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit and that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary until after Jesus was born. So, the Church has always firmly believed that God was the father of Jesus, and Mary was his mother.

But where does that leave Joseph? You know, I've always felt sorry for Joseph, in a way . . . He is all but ignored in the Bible. Where do we find mention of Joseph? Joseph is referred to only as he related to the story of the birth of Jesus, with the one exception of the incident when he and Mary found the boy Jesus talking with the teachers in the Temple in Jerusalem. We know next to nothing about the man who, along with Mary, reared God's Son into adulthood – and that's too bad.

If the Bible has ignored Joseph, the Church also has been guilty of neglecting Joseph, relegating him to a small footnote in the Christmas story. In our Christmas art and manger scenes, sometimes Joseph is no where to be found, or at best a mere bystander along with nameless shepherds. For example, can you ever recall seeing a picture or statue of Joseph holding Jesus? They are as rare as hen's teeth. If I were an artist, I'd paint one!

We focus so extensively on the role of Mary as the mother of Jesus, that we overlook the important role Joseph played as the foster father of the Son of God.

In ignoring Joseph, we are saying that fathers aren't important – at least, not as important as mothers. Last week, I preached on Mary as God's chosen to be the mother of Jesus. This morning, we are focusing our attention on God's choice of a surrogate to father his Son into manhood – Joseph, the only man Jesus ever knew as "father."

Therefore, this Christmas, its high time we gave Joseph his due! God tapped Joseph to be Jesus' earthly father just as deliberately as he selected Mary to be His mother. In fact, Joseph should serve as a role model for all of us who are fathers, or have ever had a father, as we consider the qualities of this remarkable forgotten man in the shadows. What qualities made Joseph such a fine role model?

First of all, Joseph was a good husband.

As we consider Joseph as a father to Jesus, we must first recognize that, in order for a man to be great father to his children, he must first of all, be a great husband to his wife.

As I said, the Bible doesn't tell us too much about Joseph, but we know by the story of Jesus' birth that Joseph must have been an exceptional husband to Mary. We see that right from the beginning of the story: Joseph learns that the woman he is engaged to is pregnant – and not with his child. Rather than take her before the courts and have her stoned to death, as was his right under Jewish law, Joseph planned to quietly and mercifully divorce her. But then, as we have read in our text this morning, an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to go ahead and take Mary as his wife anyway because she had been chosen by God to be the mother of God's Son.

And what did Joseph do? He took Mary to be his wife, even though the neighbors might gossip behind their backs, questioning the legitimacy of their baby. You see, if he had divorced Mary, those in the village would have seen that as confirmation that Mary had been unfaithful – even adulterous. Even with a divorce breaking their commitment to one another, Mary could still have been stoned. But instead of casting her off, Joseph stepped up and took her as his wife, thereby shifting her "shame" onto himself. Now the neighbors would have assumed that Mary was innocent of infidelity – that Joseph was the guilty party. He let them believe that he had forced himself on Mary before their marriage covenant was sealed. Even though the claim of Mary and the word of the angel in his dream seemed preposterous, Joseph acts sacrificially to protect Mary's reputation. Pretty remarkable!

Joseph didn't have to do that! But he had compassion on Mary and her predicament, and chose to spend his life with her. And apparently he was faithful to her, for together they raised a family with several sons and daughters. Mary and Joseph were a team that provided a nurturing environment for Jesus to grow . . . "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

Yes, Joseph proved to be a good husband, and therefore he could be a good father.

Which brings me to the second thing we can say about Joseph. He WAS a good father to Jesus.

You have to remember that Joseph was no blood relation of Jesus. He was, what we might call today, a step-father. Sometimes step-fathers never feel as though their son or daughter is truly theirs – there is always a distance – an awareness that the child has a different father. But

every indication in the Scriptures is that Joseph saw Jesus as his own, and that he cared for him as his own flesh and blood.

Soon after Jesus was born, you remember, Joseph learned that King Herod had set out to kill the baby that Mary had borne, and no doubt, to kill them, as well. What did Joseph do? He took his new family and fled to Egypt, without having any idea when, or even if, they could ever return. This meant that Joseph had to give up his trade in Nazareth (have you ever thought about that?). He was willing to make any sacrifice – even for a child that was not his own!

A big part of fatherhood is making sacrifices. Any of you fathers out there know that. We love our children, and so they take first priority in our lives. But sometimes we forget, don't we. How easy it is for us to become so caught up in our careers that we neglect our children. Our children NEED their fathers, just as much as they need their mothers, and fathers need to make whatever sacrifices necessary to "be there" for their children.

Joseph sacrificed his career to take Mary's Son into the safety of exile in Egypt. It's clear by his actions that Joseph saw himself as the father and protector of Jesus.

The third thing we can say about Joseph is that he was a righteous man – a godly man – a man Matthew says, "who always did what was right."

Joseph raised his children to observe their Jewish faith, and instilled in them a love for God. Luke tells us that both Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to the Temple for the rite of circumcision as commanded in Jewish law and to present their firstborn male child to be dedicated to the Lord.

In addition, we read how later Joseph and Mary took the family on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover, and how they found Jesus in the Temple courts, discussing the Scriptures with the priests. How do you suppose the 12 year old Jesus became such a scholar of the Scriptures? Probably because Joseph saw to it that Jesus was taught the Scriptures in the synagogue.

Joseph was a righteous man – a man of God – who saw to it that his children learned God's word. One of the most important responsibilities of fatherhood is making certain that their children are taught the Scriptures – but more importantly, that they MODEL the godly life for their children.

One of the joys of ministry is the opportunity of celebrating the baptism of babies. (Unfortunately, we aren't able to do as many of those as we used to because fewer and fewer young parents see the importance of baptism. It's one of the signs that we are entering into a challenging period as the Church of Jesus Christ.) - I digress ...

Anyway - In the service of baptism of an infant or young child, we ask the parents if they will model the Christian life for their children. I love the wording in the older version of this ritual:

The parents were asked, “Do you therefore accept as your bounded duty and privilege to live before this child a life that becomes the gospel, to exercise all godly care that he (or she) be brought up in the Christian faith, that he (or she) be taught the Holy Scriptures, and that he (or she) learn to give reverent attendance upon the private and public worship of God?”

Joseph saw to it that Jesus knew the Scriptures. In the words of the ritual - he was a father whose “life became the gospel.”

You know, Joseph must have been a wonderful man – a man Jesus could proudly call “father.” He was a fine husband and father, and a godly man who must have been the “role model” for the man Jesus became.

But perhaps nothing in the Bible gives stronger testimony to how highly Jesus thought of Joseph than the fact that, when he prayed to his heavenly Father, he called God “Abba.” “Abba” was the word little children would use to refer to their “papa,” their “daddy.” Growing up, Jesus knew Joseph as his “abba.” I don’t think that it’s just a coincidence that, as an adult, when Jesus thought about his heavenly father, he chose to call him “abba,” as well. He saw in God the very qualities he admired in Joseph. What higher tribute to a father could there possibly be than that!

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we consider the example of Joseph, we who are fathers need to ask ourselves: “When our children look at OUR lives, what do they see? Can they see godliness – in us?”

And so, finally, this Christmas we are confronted with the same question as those Nazarenes in we are back to the same dilemma of those neighbors of Jesus in our text – a question each of us must answer for ourselves: “Who is Jesus the son of, anyway? Is he the son of Joseph – or is he the Son of God?”

My hope is that we can honestly say that he was the son of BOTH!

Let us Pray:

Our Father God, we thank you for Joseph with whom you shared Jesus’ love and affection as his “abba.” May we find strength and inspiration from his life, that we might bring him out from the shadows of the manger, and measure our lives by his integrity and fidelity. Help all of us who are fathers strive to be the kind of father to our children that Joseph was to Jesus, the kind of man our sons and daughters can call “abba.”

Amen.