



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2019

“Joseph: The Silent Saint”

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Because Joseph . . . was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife . . .’” (Mt. 1:19-20).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

We heard Matthew's account of the incarnation this morning. It's not the nativity story that most of the children's programs use. That's Luke's account with the hosts of angels and the shepherds and the manger scene. Luke's version also focuses on Mary's receptivity to the Lord's plan.

Matthew's version is rated "M" for mature and focuses more on Joseph's response to Mary's conception. Mary's conception is a conundrum for Joseph. Remember this was a vastly different time and place from our own. Conceiving a baby outside of marriage, Joseph and Mary would have been subject to intense social shame, sort of like what our culture reserves for Neo-Nazis. We have no patience for them or their ideology, and rightly so. Ancient Israel had no patience for unwed childbirth, only scorn.

Can you imagine Mary breaking the news? "Joseph, I don't know how to say this gently, so I'll just come out with it: I'm pregnant . . . but it's not what you think. You see, there were these angels . . ."

Can you imagine? Joseph knows the child is not his, and he knows this is not how he saw his life unfolding. Surely Joseph is tempted, tempted to lash out at Mary and hurt her, or at least not help her. Surely Joseph wants others to know that he wasn't responsible for this; Mary was. We like to think that after the dream, Joseph no longer had any doubts about Mary's trustworthiness and faithfulness, but I'm not so sure. I suspect the doubts linger and nag Joseph for some time.

Being a good man, Joseph considers his options and decides to divorce Mary quietly. Let people say what they want about him. Let them heap shame and scorn on him for impregnating Mary and then abandoning her. At least it would preserve Mary from the worst of the backlash. What a good thing Joseph is about to do. He'll take the burden of the shame and scorn as if it belonged to him. This, in turn, would allow Mary to live. In my mind, this makes Joseph the forgotten saint. He's a good man, trying to do the right thing. Most of the

historic artwork, however, is all about Mary and the shepherds and wisemen, while Joseph is marginalized and mostly ignored.

Please have a look at the front cover of your bulletin. This is a terracotta work of art by Niccolo Donatello. I saw it recently in the Art Institute of Chicago, which, by the way, is a great place for sermon fodder. Mary focuses our attention on Jesus. The Christmas carol says the “The little Lord Jesus [is] asleep on the hay.” But he’s not asleep, nor is he so little. That birth would have been one for the record books. He also seems mature for his age, and strong. Already he’s able to hold up his head and lean casually on one elbow. The ox and the ass are there. Ignoring their hay they are gazing at Jesus, and seem almost to be warming him with their breath. It makes me think of Isaiah 1, “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Makes me also think of John 1, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” But at least the ox and the ass know their Lord.

All of them are awake and alert, except for poor Joseph who is seven sheets to the wind! Maybe it’s because he’s so old. We don’t know how old Joseph would have been, but the medieval art often depicts him nearly on his last legs, needing a staff to prop himself up. He’s usually bearded, bald on top with gray hair on the sides, as he is here. Often he looks frail, with thin, arthritic fingers and a sharp nose. Many times, Joseph is asleep, and appears frumpy, especially when compared to Mary’s coiffed radiance. It might have something to do with the fact he’s always sleeping in his clothes.

Joseph just can’t seem to rouse himself. Maybe the trip from Nazareth is catching up to him, or the lack hospitality once they reach Bethlehem. He dearly wants to provide for Mary, but he can’t even talk his way into a room for Mary while she gives birth. Moreover, there’s the social shame of it all. People are talking. “How could he have done this to that fine young woman?” And then the birth itself. Joseph wants to be helpful but isn’t sure how. It all seems to have overwhelmed him.

Joseph has not been a popular saint. Again, in the artwork, he’s often standing in the shadows, the background, sometimes crowded out even by the shepherds and their sheep. Once again, he did not make the 2019 Christmas stamp.

He’s crowded out in other ways too. One journalist studied a list of 30,000 men who lived in Florence, Italy around

1530. That list contained precisely one “Giuseppe” (one Joseph) (Time, 12/19/05). In our hymnal, Joseph is mentioned just once, safely tucked away in the 14th verse (LSB 517). The shepherds appear 14 times. Mary’s name appears 17 times.

Why? Part of it certainly has to do with all the elaborate tradition surrounding Mary. Another reason is the Bible itself just doesn’t have much to say about Joseph. Not a single word of his is recorded in Scripture. After the nativity and circumcision of Jesus, Joseph is mentioned just one more time, when he and Mary lose track of Jesus in Jerusalem. After that, he simply disappears from Scripture, presumably because he died.

So Joseph is the silent saint. But remember, of all the men God chose Joseph to be the “adoptive” father of God’s own Son Jesus. Joseph was going to divorce Mary quietly, but then the dreams began. And that’s also why he is often depicted sleeping in the medieval art. Four times, God gave him a dream. The first: don’t be afraid to take Mary as his wife because she has conceived by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:20-21). The second: leave Bethlehem now and flee to Egypt (2:13). The third: it’s safe now to go back to Israel, for Herod has died (2:19-20). And the fourth: you probably want to avoid Judea because Herod’s son Archelaus now wears the crown, and he’s not much better than his father. So Joseph took his family back to Nazareth in Galilee.

Joseph is a quiet saint, yes, but his actions speak volumes. Joseph is a model of obedience and responsibility, a person from antiquity whose example is so needed today. Joseph is always trying to do the right thing, even though it may cost him dearly.

Today, we have a crisis of responsibility. The U.S. Census Bureau says that one-third of all American children today are growing up without their biological fathers. For years we’ve been trying to convince ourselves that children really don’t need fathers, that fathers are mostly superfluous. But the statistics cannot be avoided. One young man who grew up without a father said, “When the father’s not there, something gets broken that cannot be fixed” (USA Today, 6/15/18). Patrick McCarthy, a physician and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation which advocates for low-income families and children recently said, “No matter what we tell

ourselves in society, a child who lives in the house with a mother and a father who are married to each other is still the best place for a child to grow up. There's a cultural attack on the nuclear family as old and passe, but the data suggests that [the nuclear family is still the best environment for a child] (Ibid.).

We have a crisis of responsibility in our country. We don't look after our own health as we should. We don't assume responsibility for the environment; it might adversely impact the economy. If we're not happy, we assume it's somebody's fault. If our children aren't thriving in school, it's usually because of the teacher. If they're not thriving in sports it's because of the coach . . . or the refs.

In contrast, the life of Joseph speaks a word to us of responsibility. He's a lunch pail hero, doing what needs to be done however messy, taking responsibility because it's the right thing to do. Maybe we can learn from Joseph today, and assume more responsibility, not less: for our children, for a neighbor who needs help, for our community, our world, not out of obligation and duty, but out of love. Out of love, Joseph assumed responsibility for Jesus, who, again out of love, assumed responsibility for us.

That's what Christmas is about, finally. Your sin and death were not Jesus' problems, but he made them his problems. Out of love he took them on as his own responsibility. Celebrating Christmas, we are celebrating the fact that God took responsibility for all your sinful thoughts, words and actions. At great personal cost, God claimed your sin as his own and suffered their just punishment. It wasn't rational what Joseph did. It wasn't rational what Jesus did. Selfless, yes and also sacrificial. But rational? No. But God keeps putting people in our paths to love and serve, even when it's not rational.

The opportunities God lays before us are not always for dramatic work that will be recognized and celebrated. Usually it's the opposite. God's important work is quietly assuming responsibility: changing diapers, taking care of the baby; taking care of an aging, lonely parent, patiently standing with a troubled teenager. Sometimes God's important work is doing what needs to be done, standing in the back, inconspicuous, back there behind the shepherds, in the shadows, with gray hair

and arthritic fingers and sore legs and an uncertain future . . . but being there, and doing what you can because it's the right thing to do; it's what God is calling you to do.

Joseph took responsibility for Jesus who took responsibility for us. In taking responsibility, maybe, like Joseph, we'll discover God's purpose for our lives. We'll discover we're doing precisely what God wants us to do, and what could be better than that? Amen.

