

Third Sunday of Advent  
December 16, 2007  
Joseph  
The Rev. David W. Lovelace

Of all the persons involved in the Advent of Christ and aware of his coming there is one who is all but forgotten. Even artists who have lavishly portrayed the Nativity have been content to make Joseph part of the dark background. Yet, this man was more than a mere piece of furniture. As his wife Mary was chosen by God to be the Mother of Jesus, so too Joseph was chosen to be his earthly father.

Actually we do not know much about Joseph, yet we do know that God called on him to believe the most unbelievable story that has ever been told. Joseph was a man faced with profound doubts and yet he became a man of tremendous faith.

*Enter Joseph*

Tell me what you would have done? The rabbi asked me, "Have you brought a token to give to the bride to signify the covenant you intend to make?"

I was a poor man, a carpenter. I did not have much to offer as a dowry. But I did bring total commitment, my complete love for Mary, I told the scribe that I brought all I possessed, every stick, every penny, every bit of hewn wood.

The scribe wrote out the terms of the contract as I spoke them, "I, Joseph, will work and honor Mary in the tradition of our faith and our God, all my property and worldly belongings will be hers forever." It was done - we were engaged or betrothed.

Then the festivities began. The children came forward with outstretched hands for nuts and cakes. Even this festive celebration was a grave event for Mary in turn promised that she would keep herself only for me.

Three months before the wedding ceremony was to take place Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth in a small town near Jerusalem. Upon her return

she said to me, "Joseph, I am with child." Not like the whole town could not tell!

Imagine, just like that. Joseph, I am pregnant. Then there was this ridiculous story about an angel and a message from God. What would you have done?

Pregnant by the Holy Spirit? I wondered what Elizabeth had given my 14 year old betrothed to drink. Perhaps it was the young age at which our women were married that caused Mary to concoct this story to cover her sin. The Mother of the Messiah....that is just too much to believe.

When Mary told me I was too stunned to reply. I staggered home like a man drunk on too much new wine. I lay upon my bed, my face hot with tears. In my mind I asked over and over, whose child was this really? I could not even pray. I wondered, was God making a fool of me.

If Mary's story was true, then this child belonged to Jerusalem and not in a carpenter's home. If it was not true, then there was another and Mary was unfaithful to our covenant. You have no idea the sleepless nights. I could by law denounce Mary for a violation of God's law. Punishment was stoning to death and I could not do that to Mary. I could release her to marry another, if in fact there was another. But I loved her. I had pledged my life to her, how could I just let her go.

There seemed only one way open to me. I would privately give her a bill of divorce in front of two witnesses perhaps that way I could spare her feelings as much as possible.

That night with my decision made, I fell into a deep sleep. I heard a voice calling to me as from the end of a deep tunnel. "Joseph, son of David, it is all right, be at peace." Suddenly I awoke to see an angel standing over me. He said to me, "I am a messenger from God. I am sent to tell you not to fear to take Mary as your wife. She has conceived a child by the Holy Spirit, as she said, and she will bear a son. You will call his name Jesus for he has come to save his people."

I turned and whispered, "Don't mock me." "It is true Joseph, recall the prophecy. A virgin will bear a son called Emmanuel, God with us. That prophesy is fulfilled. Make haste to take Mary as your wife."

I am not sure what happened after that. I knew what I had to do but I was not a man to have visions or be visited by angels. I am a simple carpenter and this is the most incredible story I have ever heard. My Mary is going to bear a son who is the Messiah. Incredible.

Tell me, you sophisticated folks of a modern world, what would you have done? It was more than I could understand.

I knew I loved Mary. I knew I wanted her for my wife and I trusted her.

Shortly before the child was to be born we received word that we had to travel to the place of our ancestors to be enrolled for taxes. I was from Bethlehem being of the lineage of David. The tax was to be used to pay the pension of retired Roman soldiers. Just what we did not need, one more tax. Mary was almost ready to deliver the child and now this. They call it peace but I called it tyranny.

We traveled to Bethlehem under a death penalty for not obeying. You are aware of what happened to us there. Your Scriptures tell a beautiful story. Would it lessen your faith if I told you it was not beautiful? Our son was born in a cattle stall with the stink and the noise. There was no room for us anywhere so we had to take shelter where it was to be found. There was no bed, no bed clothing. Mary wrapped the baby and placed him in a cattle feeding trough, a manger. Any doctors out there? Do you wonder that he survived - I marveled too? If this child was the long expected Messiah why was he born in this way? I had to wonder.

I made the necessary enrollment and prepared for the journey home. The night before we left an angel appeared a second time. "That the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Remain there until I tell you to return home. Herod is about to search the country for this child to destroy him."

I could not deny this experience a second time. I took Mary and the child and fled to Egypt. When we did return home we heard the horrible story of how Herod ordered the killing of innocent children. He had heard the story of Jesus' birth from three magi that came in search of him.

On the way we presented Jesus at the Temple to promise to give our son to God and for Mary's purification. There was an old man there named Simeon who identified Jesus as the Son of God. We marveled again.

When we finally returned home from Egypt we settled into a normal routine. Jesus learned to help me in the carpenter's shop. Mary and I had other children which I suppose you know. Jesus had four brothers and two sisters. We were a poor family but we made the most of every day. I taught my sons the Scriptures and how to be faithful to our traditions. The boys and I went each day to the synagogue to learn from the rabbis. Judaism is the only religion at the time that set out to educate all people. You model your Sunday School after our religious training.

As he grew older Jesus asked questions I could not answer. The local rabbi was stumped too. All I could say is wait and ask the rabbis in Jerusalem. Your Scriptures tell the story of our trip to the Temple when he was twelve. After that trip your Scriptures are silent about me.

What can I tell you? For a few years I was privileged to be a father to Jesus. It was an awesome responsibility. God gives to those of you who are parents the same responsibility and blessing today. Take your children by the hand and lead them to God.

You have an advantage over me. You have over 2000 years of history and you know the plan God had for Jesus. In fact I did not live to see that glorious day of God's victory. But you ... you see...you see the cross... you see the love.... you see the empty tomb. What does it mean to you? What will it mean to your children and your children's children?