

“Do not be afraid”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight, we continue with our Advent midweek series titled, “Welcoming Emmanuel: God with us.” Joseph and Mary are models for us about life’s questions, in relationships like marriage, in friendships, and in our individual struggles and questions. Joseph and Mary remind us that things do not always go according to our plans, yet as God provided wisdom and direction for them, so too, God is also “Emmanuel, God with us.”

Tonight, we’ll meditate upon Joseph’s experience and response to the angel’s announcement to him in a dream. Quite honestly, we don’t know a lot about Joseph apart from the nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke – and Mark’s gospel doesn’t mention Joseph at all. In the genealogies provided by Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ lineage is traced back through Joseph to Abraham (Mt. 1:1-17) and to Adam (Lk. 3:23-38) with the aim of demonstrating that through Joseph, Jesus was descended from King David. This mention of Adam also reminds us of the way Paul writes about Jesus as the spiritual Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-49), whose body is raised and imperishable. Jesus Christ is the new Adam.

However, let’s also look a few other places Joseph is mentioned. Joseph is mentioned twice in John’s gospel, in John 1:45, when Philip introduces Jesus to Nathanael, saying, “*We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*” And again, in John 6:42, where people murmured about Jesus, “*Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?*”

In addition, in Luke 2, Joseph and Mary are mentioned as “parents” searching for their son Jesus in Jerusalem, finally finding him in the temple sitting among the teachers listening and asking questions. We are left to imagine that such a precocious young boy must have been carefully raised by his parents, Joseph and Mary.

Matthew’s gospel (13:54-57) also provides Joseph’s occupation as a carpenter in the episode of Jesus’ rejection by his hometown of Nazareth, when people in the synagogue, astounded by his teaching, asked, “*Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers...and all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?*” And they took offense at him.”

To summarize, Joseph stood in the Davidic line, with roots going back to Abraham and Adam. He was a carpenter who lived in Nazareth with Mary and their sons, and his sisters were part of this community. Joseph appears to have been a thoughtful man who imparted wisdom to his son Jesus, and if we are to take the incarnation seriously, we might say that

“Jesus grew as you and I” – that Joseph’s role as Jesus’ father was significant to the man that Jesus became.

There is a hymn titled, “In a Lowly Manger Born” (ELW 718), which is an English translation of a well-loved Japanese hymn. The tune name of this hymn, MABUNE, means “manger” and is often sung at Epiphany, celebrating Jesus’ birth made manifest to the nations. The first verse of this hymn reads,

In a lowly manger born, humble life begun in scorn; under Joseph’s watchful eye,
Jesus grew as you and I; knew the sufferings of the weak, knew the patience of the
meek, hungered as but poor folk can; this is he. Behold the man.

These words, “Behold the man” make me wonder what Joseph’s role was in helping Jesus grow into the man he became. If we take seriously the incarnation as God’s dwelling in the humanity of Jesus, in his wisdom and faith, in his concern for the weak and poor, we might also ask how Jesus grew “under Joseph’s watchful eye.” As a carpenter, Joseph was likely not rich and there may have been times, economically, when he and his family struggled. Joseph and Mary, seem to have taken Jesus to worship because they were well-known in their synagogue. Therefore, we might also imagine Joseph’s role in raising Jesus in the Jewish faith and in teaching him the scriptures. So we might ask, where did Joseph himself develop the inner strength and faith that guided his son Jesus?

Tonight’s gospel reading offers a significant hint. As a young man, Joseph had faced a serious turning point in his life as he struggled to either end his betrothal to Mary or follow through with the marriage agreement by taking her as his wife. According to Jewish law, the betrothal and the taking of the bride into the bridegroom’s house were the two parts, the beginning and the ending, of the legal process of marriage.

It was here at this point that Joseph struggled. Matthew describes Joseph as a “righteous man” who did not want Mary to face public disgrace, which according to Mosaic law could have meant death for Mary if she were found to be pregnant by someone other than the one to whom she was betrothed. The text leads us to believe that Joseph not only loved Mary but was committed to not making her face this kind of possibility.

As Joseph faced this interior ethical struggle, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, *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.* How could Joseph have known the far-reaching implications of his decision upon the future role his son would have in human history? The words, “Do not be afraid,” must have been balm to his spirit. Before Jesus could grow as you and I, Joseph had to grow in faith and trust in God’s plan for his own life. Joseph awoke and

did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. We know Joseph's story because Joseph must have eventually shared his dream with, either or both, Mary and Jesus.

All of us know the feeling of going to sleep troubled by something we need to do, make a decision about, or act upon. The phrase "let me sleep on it" comes from this phenomenon of seeking the clarity of mind that sleep and rest afford to us. Perhaps you have talked with someone about a dream you had or have had the experience of actually talking with someone *in a dream* about your dilemma. I have had both these experiences any number of times. And any number of times I have awoken in the morning with a clarity of vision and purpose that I lacked before sleep. I keep a notebook in my nightstand for this very purpose because if I don't write it down in that very brief liminal moment between sleep and being fully awake, I know that memory of the dream will be gone.

This mystery of God speaking to us in our dreams, speaking in the mystery of our subconsciousness, happened to Joseph two more times as God warned Joseph to take Mary and the baby Jesus to Egypt to escape King Herod (Mt. 2:13-15), and again after Herod's death to return (Mt. 2:19-23) and settle in Nazareth.

Our Advent theme, "Welcoming Emmanuel: God with us" reminds us that like Joseph, God is at work in us, in the mystery of our subconscious lives helping us to overcome our fears so that we might accomplish God's plan for us.

If nothing else, the story of Joseph is a story of "God with us" because God was with Joseph not only as he made this momentous decision, but as he lived his life raising Jesus as his father.

Tonight's text from Isaiah reads, "*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has come to my salvation.*"

Do not be afraid. Joseph's story is our story. God continues to come to our salvation.

Jesus lives raised to meet you in your dreams, to walk with you in your waking, and to give you a vision for living in this world.

Do not be afraid. Like Joseph, Emmanuel is with you, so you might be with others. Amen.