

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
Narrative Lectionary Year 1  
Readings: Matthew 1: 18-25  
December 21, 2014  
Haven Lutheran Church    Hagerstown MD

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

"My most vivid childhood memory of Christmas," writes columnist Dave Barry, "that does not involve opening presents, putting batteries in presents, playing with presents, and destroying presents before sundown, is the annual Nativity Pageant at St. Stephens Episcopal Church in Armonk, New York." Mrs. Elson was the director, and she would tell the children what role they would play, based on their artistic abilities. For example, if you were short you would get a role as an angel, which involved being part of the Heavenly Host and gazing with adoration at the Christ Child.

"Shepherd was my favorite role," recalls Barry, "because you got to carry a stick, plus you spent most of the pageant waiting back in the closet with a rope that led up to the church bell and about 750,000 bats. Many were the happy rehearsal hours we shepherds spent back there in the dark, whacking each other with sticks and climbing up the ladder so as to cause bat emission products to rain down upon us.

"After a couple of years as shepherd, you usually did a stint as a Three King. This was not nearly as good a role because you had to lug around the gold, the frankincense and of course, the myrrh, which God forbid you should drop because they were played by valuable antique containers belonging to Mrs. Elson. Nevertheless, being a Three King was better than being Joseph, since Joseph had to hang around with Mary who was played by a girl. You had to wait backstage with this girl and walk in with this girl. Needless to say, you felt like a total wonk, which was not helped by the fact that the shepherds and three kings were constantly suggesting that you really liked this girl. So during the pageant Joseph tended to maintain the maximum allowable distance from Mary, as though she were carrying some kind of fatal bacteria." <sup>1</sup>

Dave Barry has a point. It wouldn't be much fun to play Joseph. Joseph appears to be an secondary character in the Christmas drama. He holds the reins of a donkey. He stands in the shadow of Mary and the baby Jesus in the stable. He almost seems to blend in the background. Joseph has no lines to speak in the Christmas Day drama. He just stands there. Nowhere in any of the gospels does Joseph ever say a word.<sup>2</sup> We don't know a lot about Joseph other than he was a carpenter from the small town of Nazareth. "At first view there was nothing striking about this man.... [maybe] a person of few words, much more apt to show his feelings by arriving at your door with his tool chest to fix that stool, table, or door latch — a doer, not a talker.... [Maybe] an unassuming person, who stood patiently in lines, waiting his turn."<sup>3</sup> It may not be much fun to play Joseph in the Christmas pageant but, like much of God's actions, there is much more to Joseph than first meets the eye.

When Matthew speaks of Mary and Joseph being engaged, you must step back from the picture of an eager man going down on one knee to ask the woman he loves to marry him. Engagement at the time of Jesus birth was a formal contractual matter, usually decided on by families. Joseph and Mary's families had made such an agreement. They were formally engaged or betrothed to each other. There was a legal bond between them even though they were not yet married. If for some reason either one wanted to break off the engagement a legal divorce was required. When the couple did take the next step and marry, the whole town would be invited for a celebration that may last anywhere from a few days to a week.

We don't know if the wedding date had been set, but Mary and Joseph were officially, legally engaged. Maybe they had known each other since they were children, maybe not. But they were to marry, share a life and grow their own family. That was the plan. Then Joseph learns that Mary is with child. Was it Mary who told him not only about the baby but the angel, about its conception being by the Holy Spirit? We don't know. What

we do know is that if Joseph divorced her everyone else would consider that an announcement that Mary had committed adultery and was carrying another man's baby. By law she would then be considered an adulterous woman who was to be stoned to death. By choosing to quietly divorcing Mary in the presence of two witnesses, we learn something significant about that silent man named Joseph. Even before an angel came to his dreams, we already know something of the character of Joseph — he was a “righteous man.” He not only knew the letter of the law, he knew the compassionate and merciful nature and will of God, too. Deciding to dismiss Mary quietly, Joseph was deciding “I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her, or demean her value, her dignity, or her worth. I will protect her.”<sup>4</sup> Joseph was a man of God and God's own gracious nature.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream. The messenger from God confirms Mary has not betrayed him or his trust, “for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” What is implicit in the angel's messenger is that the Lord is asking Joseph not only to accept Mary as his wife but the baby as his son — that socially important first son and heir, for whom he wouldn't even get to choose a name. Through Joseph the baby would be grafted to the royal family tree of David and be named Jesus, derived from the Hebrew “Joshua” that means “Yahweh saves.”

I don't think I have ever fully appreciated how much the Lord was asking of Joseph. The life he may had imagined with Mary and their first child was turned upside down and forfeited. Remaining faithful to a marriage with a pregnant Mary and adopting Jesus, meant he risked being perceived as disobedient or disreputable — maybe becoming an outcast — to his family and community, for the sake of being obedient to God's call.<sup>5</sup> Joseph may never say a word in the Bible but his actions speak volumes of his character and strength, of his faith and trust in God.

“Through an angel, God said to Joseph in a dream, “I want you to marry Mary. I want you to go ahead and marry her. I want you to take care of her. I have chosen you to raise her boy.... Joseph, I want you to raise the baby. You feed the baby. You care for the mother. You care for the baby.”<sup>6</sup> And Joseph said in his actions, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be...according to your word.” Like Dave Barry, many of us don’t have it right about Joseph. Joseph willingly joined his life to Mary and faced with her the danger and scandal of bringing this baby boy into the world. The baby would be “Emmanuel” — God with us — and bridge the gap between God and humanity so that nothing could separate us from the presence and love of God. As we still sit in the waiting room of Advent, looking toward the story of God’s coming later this week, we can begin to celebrate the Christmas gift of Joseph. “Because when Jesus is born, the man who will teach him, raise him, care for him, show him how to be a carpenter, take him to the synagogue, teach him his Bible and teach him his lessons is a good man and he will do right”<sup>7</sup>... and Christmas will last as long as God can find persons who will say, “I will do what is right,”<sup>8</sup> I will do what you ask, Lord. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 12/20/14

## ENDNOTES

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1. Dave Barry, *DAVE BARRY'S GREATEST HITS* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988), pp. 76-78.
  2. King Duncan “Christmas To Remember” Passage Collected Sermons, King Duncan, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20
  3. Richard P. Olson, *THE PRACTICAL DREAMER* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1990), pp. 34-35.
  4. Fred B. Craddock, “God Is With Us.” The Cherry Log Sermons Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001 p. 5
  5. This sentence adapted from a sentence in James Boyce “Commentary on Matthew 1: 18-25” as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  6. Craddock, p. 6
  7. Craddock, p. 6
  8. Craddock, p. 6 (adapted)