

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Joseph. Joseph. Joseph. Did you ever notice that Joseph gets no lines. In the pageant last week, Joseph got to speak, but that was what we call artistic license. In the Bible he’s not able to utter a single word in any of the four gospels.

We know so little about him. Sometimes, when people mention Joseph, from the Bible, we confuse him with the guy with the technicolor dreamcoat, the Joseph from the Old Testament. And sometimes, in the nativity scene, Joseph and the shepherd get mixed up! Is he this bearded guy or that bearded guy? He’s even left out of the beautiful Renaissance images of Mother Mary and Jesus that are called Madonna and Child. You rarely see Madonna and Child and “bearded guy in background.”

In her book *Gospel Medicine*, Barbara Brown Taylor asks the question that we’re all thinking, “Is Joseph a father or a stepfather? A husband or a chaste roommate? Is he the head of the family unit or [just the male provider] for God’s own wife and child? Christian tradition has never known quite what to do with Joseph.”

But I think Joseph is a hero. An absolute champion. A model of faith and devotion and loyalty and self-sacrifice, and an unsung hero. You know, I tried to find a hymn specifically about Joseph in our hymnal. Nothing. He's literally an unsung hero. You have Mary, Did You Know? You have, in Silent Night, everyone gathered "round yon virgin mother and child." No mention of Joseph.

Mary gets to sing her own song in Luke, the incredibly powerful Magnificat, and even Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist gets to sing, but Joseph. Gets. Nothing!

Thankfully, Matthew remembers Joseph. He adds our story today about a dream Joseph had, some of the internal thoughts Joseph wrestled with, and later he'll throw in another dream in which Joseph realizes he has to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt to escape Herod's homicidal madness. But when you think about the totality of the Gospel stories, and the important role Joseph played, he really doesn't get enough credit. He's such a quiet, behind-the-scenes figure.

But that's what's so special about Joseph in this story. We all know people like Joseph. You might even be one. The strong, silent type. The kind who prefer not to speak into a microphone. The kind who prefer not to be leader of anything. Gets the job done but doesn't toot the horn. Lots of people can relate to Joseph.

Think about it. There are, in this church, about eleven people who are willing to be the worship assistant, and two hundred and fifty-four who absolutely refuse to speak at the pulpit. There are people in this church who made a living as managers, public educators, in sales, in the military, engineers, all who refuse to stand here and speak. And that's ok. You contribute to the life of this church in so many other steady, reliable, consistent, behind the scenes ways.

My grandfather, Gene Courtney, was a Joseph. He worked for a natural gas company his whole adult life. Steady. Loyal. He worked extraordinarily hard to maintain the fifteen acres or so of Kentucky land that he and his wife and mother-in-law lived on. He and my grandmother accepted the responsibility of parenting one of my cousins when she needed to move in with them full-time as a preschooler. And he was the head of the church's building and grounds team – maintaining the aging building and the

cemetery adjacent to the church. But he rarely spoke. He was quiet and steadfast and dependable. He was faithful to the end. When he walked by me, he'd gently tap me, and that meant, "I love you," but it wasn't spoken. He just did what the family needed him to do, every day, but he never sought the spotlight. In his final days, when he had strength to converse, he asked us how much propane was in the tank. He just wanted to take care of things, for his family, behind the scenes.

I look out at this congregation, and I see so many Josephs. The Tuesday guys show up when no one else is looking and give so much time doing work that is sometimes technical and challenging and sometimes just janitorial – like putting more soap in the soap dispensers. But God bless them for doing it. They never ask for the spotlight, but we would be hurting without them – physically and financially.

There are people who volunteer here at the church to fold paper in half. I'm serious. If you ever wonder if you can help the church somehow, know this. If you can do this (demonstrate) you can help the church. It's not glamorous. It's way below your professional skill set, but we have Joseph-like people who do it willingly for your sake and mine.

There are people who make coffee so you can have your precious, hot caffeine. And who make sure there's cream, sugar, cups, and napkins.

There's Charles, who is here more than I am, cutting grass, blowing leaves, trimming trees. After church today he's making luminarias to welcome people on Christmas Eve.

The ushers. The deacons. The tech team. The choir, well, the choir isn't afraid of the spotlight or the microphones, but you get it. They're all Josephs – doing what has to be done, week in and week out, without fanfare. Without glory. Just out of love for the church. Love for each other.

But I want us all to put ourselves in the shoes of Joseph for a moment today. Imagine that life is going along. You're a carpenter, a blue-collar worker. You're working day in and day out for a humble living. Most days are exactly like the rest. Eat, work, sleep. But you've been interested in this young lady, and now you're engaged to her.

She seems like she'll be a steady and faithful wife. But out of nowhere, absolutely out of nowhere, everything you know turns upside down.

Suddenly, she's pregnant, but you're not the baby daddy . . . Imagine your emotions. Shock, anger, embarrassment, confusion, frustration, but also in Matthew we read that Joseph was righteous and compassionate and wanted to not shame Mary publicly. I want to know more about that decision. Kudos to him, but I have so many questions.

It feels so relevant to think about the choice Joseph made. Because, in our own lives, there are so many variables that we have no control over. We're going along, as steady as we can, minding our own business, hoping and praying that life will continue to be routine and manageable, but life keeps throwing things into our path. There are literal deer jumping into roads, other crazy drivers, the weather, the economy, medical care, and other family member's needs. And sometimes it feels like the easiest thing to do is keep the metaphorical car pointed in the same direction, put the blinders on and stick to what we know. Maintain the status quo. Pull back and make excuses when changes are thrown at us. It's normal for us.

And Joseph could have done the same. He could have broken off the engagement and released Mary from his storyline. He wrestled with his decision, for Joseph was not told what to do, he was asked if he was willing. The Reverend John Cairns from Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago once wrote, "In this swirl of dreams and circumstances, Joseph has to make his decision. He is sorting out matters of personal integrity and measuring the bounds of commitment. He is thinking about how much one person can handle, about what he should be expected to absorb in order to make the situation better for someone else. [How many of us have asked ourselves those same questions?] He is looking for that exit that will take him away from this swirl of events, events that have come upon him too quickly and caused his moral compass to spin out of control. And he is so preoccupied that he barely hears the unbelievable question: "Will you permit God to be born? Will you stay in the midst of this mess and give your untarnished—your precious and essential—name to this scandalous child?"

This is what Frederick Buechner calls “the dark side of Christmas”— the fact that God comes to us in such a way that we have the option to turn him down. To break off the engagement. To disengage.

Yes, God came to us as the scandalous baby Joseph did not have to name and could have turned away from. But God also comes to us as the hungry woman we do not have to feed or the lonely man we do not have to comfort or the immigrant neighbor we do not have to defend. To Joseph—to you and me, to people who have too many impossible things on their plates—God comes . . . and waits for a response. Will we choose to engage, to remain engaged, to parent, to love, to protect?

As you know, a decision like this requires total commitment. Because just when we get into a rhythm we can handle, a routine we find comfortingly boring, we wake up from a dream and find that we must choose things that we might have never chosen for ourselves – lives of sacrifice and upheaval, a sudden change of address or financial responsibility, or vulnerable risk. And we’d much rather, in our righteousness, find a way to dismiss this situation quietly. Look down at our floorboard at the intersection. Change the channel when the news is uncomfortable. Delete the email. Ignore the phone call. Justify that we’ve given enough when another request comes in.

But the angel of the Lord anticipated all of this, I think. The angel started with the most important words an angel can say before presenting a request from God. “Do not be afraid.”

Do not let fear determine your response to options in life. Especially those you know come from God. Opportunities to serve, love, give, volunteer, help. I know, trust me, I know you can’t say yes to everything. That’s foolish to think, but we’ve all got to acknowledge that we disengage more often than not when we’re given a chance to participate in welcoming the presence of God into the world, and I think, more often than not, it is because we are afraid.

Fortunately for us, peace came over Joseph and he chose to remain engaged. He chose to let his life be upended. He chose to name the child Jesus and claim him as his own. Later, he chose to grab everything he could carry and flee with Mary and Jesus

to another country, cross a border without documentation, to save the child that wasn't biologically his. He kept choosing, over and over, even when it was inconvenient and stressful and dangerous.

Thanks be to God for Joseph, and for all of you who work steadily and humbly like Joseph. The story of the church wouldn't be the same without you. And I leave you with these questions: where do you see God's presence being revealed in the world? Is it this church, a non-profit, a cause, an individual? Are you engaged in that revelation – whether by giving your time, your money, your energy? Would you remain engaged with that revelation, even if things get hard? Even if things got scandalous? Even when it asks more of you than you were expecting? I know it can be scary, but don't give in to fear. Respond to the promise of God with us with hope, peace, joy, and love, and you'll find yourself doing anything and everything you can do for the sake of the Prince of Peace, just like Joseph. Amen.