

Matthew 1:18-25

When I was a little girl, every Christmas I would wait and try and be patient while the Sunday School teachers handed out the parts to the annual Christmas pageant. I did my time as a sheep, I was a shepherd once, and an angel a few times, but all I wanted every year was to be Mary. You got to wear the best costume (the same one every year). It was blue, and it had the required headpiece that I'm sure you can all picture...just absolutely beautiful. Of course, as a child I never knew that it was made out of a bed sheet...She had the most lines out of anyone (about a total of 4)...and all I knew was that I wanted to play Mary in the Christmas pageant more than anything.

And one year it happened. They were reading off the names. I wasn't in the shepherd list...phew...that's a relief. Not a wise man, either. (Some years we just didn't have enough boys for those parts.). Now the angels...please don't read my name...please don't read my name. Wait. They didn't read my name. Could it be? Did they forget about me? 'And playing Mary this year will be Sarah'. They said it! They said it. I'm Mary!

Now, the really interesting thing this year was that this was also the first year that I cared at all about who Joseph was. Because shortly after my elation of hearing my name being read for Mary, it hit me that I was going to have to stand with Joseph...I was going to have a partner, and I was going to have to act like I liked him. It never mattered before who he was, because he didn't have any lines, and if I wasn't Mary, well, then who cares, right? This wasn't going to be easy, but depending on who it was, it might be ok. So I listened intently, and was both shocked and appalled when I heard my brother's name read to play Joseph. All in all, though, I had never even thought to care about who this man was or what his role was before I had to or was required to.

How many of us are the same way? How many of us don't really know anything about Joseph other than that he's the figure that usually standing up, or maybe kneeling in our nativity scenes and that he was the earthly father of baby Jesus? Why is that? Why don't we know, and maybe even in some cases, care about who this man was or why he was important?

Perhaps its because we focus on the baby this time of year. There is nothing wrong with that. Obviously, the baby Jesus is a pretty important person in the story. We should know more about him than anyone else...that's ok. Or maybe we focus on Mary more than the other people. Again, this is ok. She was the mother, she had a pretty big part in the story. We used to even have a pink candle in the advent wreath to honor her.

But what about Joseph? Do we really think of him as we ought to? Do we really know all that much about him? I think that our Gospel writer for today must have been concerned with some of those very questions; because it seems as if he is making a point of telling us some facts about him so that we don't forget about him or think of him with less importance.

Our text for today can teach us some very important things about Joseph, or maybe I should say that in our lesson for today, Joseph has some important things to teach us...things we can use in our lives today. I'd like to look at three with you today.

The first lesson that Joseph has to teach us is that we should follow God's word. That's what being a righteous man meant. His faith was part of his life, and he knew what God's word said. He tried to follow the law in the things that he did. We can see this in the fact that he thought it wasn't ok to marry a pregnant woman. He didn't want people to think that he had done wrong because the law was important. Is it important to us? Do we even know what God's word says for our life? It could be very easy to say that we don't have to follow the law

- that's what Jesus was for, right? He made it so we can do whatever we want. Well, not quite. Our response to God's word and law are a bit different than Joseph's - and that's exactly it...our response. We respond to God because of our baptism, and we live out that baptism everyday, keeping God's word on our hearts, just like Joseph.

So we can learn from the fact that Joseph was a righteous man - that's our first lesson. If we continue on with the reading, we can learn another lesson about and from Joseph. Yes, he not only followed the law in his life, he was also a compassionate man. He knew what the society would do to an unmarried, pregnant woman. If a lot of people found out about the baby, Mary would be killed. She would be humiliated and stoned. He wasn't just unwilling to expose her to disgrace as the text reads, but he was unwilling to put her to death. This compassion was not your normal every day compassion. He wanted to live in a way that was not a burden to other people. He didn't want anything to happen to Mary even if he believed that she had betrayed him, so he was going to 'dismiss her quietly' and let them both move on with their lives. His heart was with the other - is this how we live? Do we have compassion for those around us? Do we live in a way that helps others around us instead of burdening them with who we are? There are so many ways for us to do this in our lives, and yet it is one of the most difficult things we will ever have to learn. It's not easy to think of the other when we live in a world that is so completely focused on ourselves. It takes reminders like this one that we should think of the people we pass by everyday, dismissing them quietly. We should be thankful that we have Joseph to teach us this second, important lesson.

As we continue on with our reading for today, we come to the third lesson from Joseph. We know that he knew God's word and law, and we know that he had practiced compassion on those around him. What we can also learn about and from him is that he listened for God's voice. He listened for God to lead him where God wanted him to go, and perhaps more importantly, he went! He had a relationship with God that allowed him to hear God's voice in his life. Can we say that we listen? Not just to God, but to anyone? It's not easy to listen to someone when you when you are trying to read a text message, watch TV, cook dinner and help someone with their homework all at the same time. I'm not sure that if God spoke out loud to us that we would even notice, would we? Unfortunately for us, that doesn't happen all too often. But God gets our attention in a much more impressive way. He came to earth and was born. He lived a life like ours, died on a cross and rose again. If that doesn't get our attention, something must be wrong.

We can see these three lessons in Joseph's story, can't we? It's one of those stories that we all know the basic facts, but often we don't care much beyond that because we don't have to. Maybe it's because he's usually the silent character. Just an extra piece in the crèche. But once we pay attention, there is much to see and there is much to learn.

So I have a question for you this morning...how much are we caught up in not paying attention that we miss what there is to learn? Do we miss the voices of those who are seen of as silent? Do we miss the sound of the babies cry over the wrapping paper and bubble wrap? Do we miss the smile of the child next to us as they look up at the star in the steeple and think of that night long ago? Do we miss the stories that teach us so much simply because we aren't listening?

Well, that is my challenge for all of us this fourth Sunday of Advent. This fourth Sunday of getting ready for what is to come. I challenge all of us to listen...to truly listen to the world around us for once. To hear the voice of God telling us where he wants us to go...and to follow the example of Joseph and do what God commands. Even when we're not paying attention and we're not caring, God will get our attention somehow...he always does. It will be very clear in a few days how he chose to do that, and continues even today to do that. God comes to us here in this place. He is Emmanuel...God is with us. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

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