

## ***A First Impression that Lasts***

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

8:30AM Sunday, December 19, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

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

We don't know much about Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, and the husband of Mary. Today's story from Matthew's Gospel is one of the few we have about him, and it's pretty sparse in detail. We never hear Joseph speak. We don't know what he looks like. And don't expect to find out much more about him later on in Matthew. Other than a couple stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood that mention Joseph, the Bible is rather silent about this man.

Yes, Joseph always seems to be on the periphery of things. I know he wasn't on the postage stamp I used for my Christmas cards. Perhaps you used this stamp as well—it is the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting by Giovanni Battista Salvi (also known as Sassoferrato) entitled *Madonna and Sleeping Child*. In fact, Joseph is noticeably absent from many paintings over the centuries, which usually focus on Mary holding the infant Jesus. If Joseph **is** in the painting, he's typically off to the side.

Maybe that's the way Joseph would have it. Maybe Joseph is a person who wouldn't want a big fuss made over him—realizing that his role in this story of good news was not **the** story. It was never about Joseph at all. It was always about the Son of God coming among us as a vulnerable child whom Joseph would protect and raise in obedience to God.

Only then it would be easy to dismiss Joseph as unimportant, or diminish his role. After all, prophets have entire books of the Bible named after them. We read letter upon letter by Paul to early Christian congregations, and Paul is known for talking a lot about himself in those letters. Even John the Baptist at least gets a note-worthy description as the warm-up act for the Messiah to come.

It's easy for us to view Joseph the way *Peanuts* character Lucy views the great composer Ludwig Van Beethoven. One of my annual traditions is to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas* on television. That means I get to see the same thing each year: Lucy dismissing the genius of Beethoven as she endures unrequited love from the piano-playing Schroeder. Recall how Lucy attempts to get Schroeder's attention as he practices a Beethoven piece for the Christmas play. She asks, "What kind of Christmas music is that?" Schroeder tells her it's Beethoven Christmas music. To which Lucy replies, "What has Beethoven got to do with Christmas? Everyone talks about how 'great' Beethoven was. Beethoven wasn't so great."

Schroeder stops playing. "What do you mean Beethoven wasn't so great?"

And Lucy fairly shouts her answer: "He never got his picture on bubblegum cards, did he? Have you ever seen his picture on a bubblegum card? Hmmm? How can you say someone is great who's never had his picture on bubblegum cards?"

Good grief, says Schroeder.

Believe me, Lucy would be the first to point out that Joseph never had his picture on a bubblegum card, either. Good grief.

Here in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel we get our first impression of Joseph. And since there isn't much else written about him, this first impression will have to do. But that's okay because it is an accurate impression of Joseph.

Here was a man who simply wanted to do the right thing. Joseph wasn't seeking fame and fortune. Joseph wasn't trying to make a name for himself. He wasn't looking to be on the cover of *People* magazine as Carpenter of the Year or Hunkiest Hebrew Hubby. He just wanted to do the right things in life. Make wise decisions and take thoughtful actions that were good, honorable, respectful of others, and faithful to God's ways.

Joseph was betrothed to a young woman named Mary, (which back then was more than what we consider an "engagement"—it was a legally-binding contractual agreement between two families, meaning it could only be dissolved by divorce). This betrothal was the first step into a future where Joseph and Mary would be husband and wife, establish a home, maybe have children together. But then Joseph learned Mary is already with child. In a few month's time it would become abundantly clear to the world that Mary was pregnant, and that it probably wasn't his child. Now, Joseph had several options. He could marry Mary as quickly as possible and pretend for the rest of his life the child was his, but you know there would be folks counting the months on their fingers, and gossiping behind their hands about poor Joseph and speculating who the real father was. Or, Joseph could defend his honor by publically condemning Mary for adultery and letting her suffer the consequences—a life-long scarlet "A," or possibly stoning. But at least no one would say, "Poor Joseph."

Joseph puzzled over this, thought long and hard about the right thing to do. Remember, Matthew tells us almost right from the start that Joseph was a righteous man. That means he acted in ways that were just and faithful. So he chose another option—that of divorcing Mary, but quietly so. Have her sent away somewhere to bear the child so she would not have to bear the tragic consequences of scandal. And let go of his future with her, and the family they might raise together. On the face of it, this was the best, most faithful option Joseph could take. There was loss, but Mary would be okay, the child would be okay, even Joseph would be ...okay...eventually.

Many of us are like Joseph. We live each day, confronted with decisions to make, competing interests from which to choose, differing paths to take. Most of the time we simply want to do the right thing. We're not necessarily seeking to have our

name up in lights or get our face on the cover of *People* magazine. We just want to make wise decisions, and take thoughtful actions that are good, honorable, respectful of others, and faithful to God's ways.

But so often the options we have leave us with minds and hearts racing. What to do? What to say? How to handle this or that, and handle it well? What will the consequences be? This can be exceedingly difficult. Most of the time these decisions are not nearly as black and white as the world would have us believe, or as we might wish. Which means we can be troubled and confused as we struggle to do the right thing.

Well, maybe we just need to be willing to pray a little more about it, and take a little more time before we decide. Maybe it means trusting God will, in fact, guide us in that decision-making process.

See, Joseph had time to sleep on that decision he had made to divorce Mary quietly. And in those intervening hours, God found a way to speak to Joseph to give him an even more righteous, just, and faithful path to take. Oh, it would take courage and character on Joseph's part. It was not the easy way out of a troubling situation. An angel told him to marry Mary—his own reputation be hanged—and raise the child who, it turns out, was holy, a gift to the world from a gracious God. An angel told Joseph to care for mother and child for that child would grow up to save God's people from sin, grow up and show the world a new way to live in relationship with God and neighbor.

Matthew tells us that when Joseph woke up, he acted on faith, and rose to the challenge of the path God set before him. This is our first impression of Joseph—that he is truly a righteous man of God.

Now, having read this lesson, I'm waiting for a postage stamp of one particular painting: *St. Joseph with the Infant Jesus* by another 17<sup>th</sup> century artist named Guido Reni. What a tender image! No longer on the periphery, Joseph lovingly holds the Christ child and the Christ child lovingly touches Joseph's beard.

As you and I approach the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus, my hope is that we would remember Matthew's brief words about Joseph that provide a lasting impression. And then, when you and I face the challenge of our daily decisions, may our time spent in prayer and discernment about God's good ways guide us. May the Christ dwell with us, touch us, and lead us into a whole new way of life. Come, Lord Jesus. **AMEN.**