



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for December 12, 2021
"Images of Christmas: A Father's Faith"
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Matthew 1: 18-24

Don't Forget

I love the *Family Circus* cartoon that has Billy spending the afternoon wandering through various stores where the sign read, "*Don't forget your Christmas candy. Don't forget your wrapping paper. Don't forget your last-minute gifts. Don't forget to visit Santa.*"

Billy then goes home and draws a picture of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and writes on it, "*Don't forget.*"

It is easy to forget what is, indeed, the reason for this season. In what is increasingly becoming a secular holiday, it is all too easy to leave "*Mary, Joseph, and Jesus*" out of the mix. We need to resist that. Hence our efforts here on Sunday mornings to come face to face with the images of Christmas, in which "*Mary, Joseph, and Jesus*" are standing front and center.

Front and Center

Even for those who believe, Joseph sort of gets a lost in the shuffle. We should never "*forget*" the important role he played in and around Christ's birth. Some say Joseph is more behind the scenes; not so in my book. I am of the mind that Joseph stands front and center when it comes to the birth of Christ.

In Scripture, Joseph makes a splash in Matthew and Luke. He is mentioned only twice in John and, even then, very indirectly. He's nowhere to be found in Mark.

Scholars are quick to share that Matthew tells the story of Christ's birth from Joseph's perspective, while Luke tells it from Mary's. Regardless, Joseph plays an important role in the birth of Christ. He also figures heavily in Christ's early years. Interestingly, he is not so much mentioned once Christ enters his public ministry.

It could very well be that Joseph took the same attitude as did John the Baptist. Remember it was John who said, "*I must decrease, so that he can increase.*"

Regardless, Joseph's faith inspires us to this day. Let's read about that as we turn to the Scripture. We read today from Matthew 1:18-24.

Matthew 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

Persevering with Faith

If you remember, the past couple of weeks we spent a great deal of time pointing out the stresses and strains faced by Mary. She was young and vulnerable. She faced an uncertain future. The fact that she was pregnant out of wedlock left her with the high potential of being ostracized by society. It was Mary's faith though that saw her through.

Joseph also faced a lot. He too had to wonder about what was going on. He too had to be concerned about what others would think. He too had to be concerned about the future. Like Mary, Joseph put his faith in God. He trusted God to provide, and God never once let him down. God is worthy of our trust. He stands to provide just what we need right when we need it.

Joseph Was Obedient

The scripture tells us that Joseph was a "*righteous man.*" He loved Mary deeply. He wanted to do right by her at every turn. He certainly didn't want to submit her to any sort of "*public disgrace.*"

Mary and Joseph were betrothed. Back in those days, a betrothal was a long and binding engagement. Mary's pregnancy sort of muddied that a bit. We can only begin to imagine. It was a curve ball to say the least. In the mix of that, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.*" Again, God stands to provide, just what we need right when we need it.

The angel told Joseph to "*take Mary as your wife,*" because what was conceived in her was "*from the Holy Spirit.*"

It was then that Joseph woke from his slumbers and “*did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*” Of all the things we can say about Joseph, it was his faith that set him apart. He not only heard the voice of the angel but heeded it.

A heart of faith puts us at the very place where we not only hear, but are able to heed. “*He did what the angel commanded,*” rings through the ages. May it be that we too are of the same disposition. Let’s listen for the voice of God and with faith find ourselves ready to heed it.

Joseph Was Present

Joseph certainly could have done otherwise. He could have just as easily flown the coop. Instead, Joseph chose to heed the word of the Lord and stand by Mary and, even more importantly, the interests of their unborn child.

At the very least, Joseph was present, in contrast to so many dads who aren’t. There are far too many dads who in the interest of getting ahead are so pre-occupied with other things that they fail to be present when it comes to their kids. What a shame!! Dads, nothing is more important than being present in the lives of your children.

Joseph Wanted to Promote and Protect

Joseph was not only present in the life of his family but wanted to promote their interests as well. Joseph was all about Mary’s best interests and the interests of the child entrusted to his care. Joseph wanted to make sure that Mary and the one she carried was well-cared for.

As we said earlier, Joseph refused to submit Mary to “*public disgrace.*” If a divorce was in the offing, he would do that quietly. If anything, Joseph was a great support. He tended to Mary’s needs. When it came to Jesus, he was great support as well.

Once back in Nazareth, Joseph continued his work as a carpenter. In fact, Jesus was often referred to as “*the Son of a Carpenter.*” We can only guess what took place while the two worked together. Working side by side, I’m sure that Joseph was able to impart a good deal of wisdom. His presence alone had to speak volumes. He was a supreme example. Joseph was a good example in Christ’s life, just as we need to be to those who are closest to us.

Joseph stayed at it when it came to looking out for the interests of his family, particularly their needs spiritually. Joseph made sure that Jesus was circumcised on the eight-day. That’s recorded in Luke 2:21.

Joseph made sure that Jesus was taken to Jerusalem for his purification. A record of that is found in Luke 2:22ff. It’s there that they met Anna and Simeon.

Later Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover. You can find that recorded in Luke 2:41-49. While there Jesus astonished the teachers of the law with his profound understanding of the things of God.

Early on, Joseph led his family to safety in Egypt for fear that Herod would kill him. We find that recorded in Matthew 1:13ff. Joseph wanted to make sure that those he loved were kept safe.

Joseph was not only present in the life of his family, but he promoted them anyway he could. He also wanted to protect them. Again, Joseph is a good example for us all.

I will never forget the afternoon a few years back while visiting Kenya for a mission trip when we gathered the men in the village we were serving and talked with them about their role as a husband and father. I remember trying to encourage them in every way. I also remember them saying how hard it was to connect with their kids and how tough it was to provide for their needs, and I don't think they were only talking about just their temporal needs. We were honest with one another that afternoon about how hard it is being a husband and father.

In the recent radio commercials on parenting there's an emphasis on not being perfect, only engaged. And as we have shared repeatedly today Joseph was when he could have very well done otherwise.

Home for the Holidays

The scriptures about Joseph can just as easily be preached on Father's Day as on the third Sunday of Advent. They have a lot to say to us dads and to all others in family. Being present, promoting the interests of those you love, and looking to protect them goes a long way toward strengthening the family God's way.

You and I both know that Christmas is very much a family holiday. The holidays are busy, there's no doubt about it. They are filled with all sorts of parties and special events. Have you noticed though that all those things begin to die down the closer we get to Christmas? That's because we all head home for Christmas.

"Home for the Holidays" is more than a cliché. As tough as it is sometimes to head home, we know that's where we need to be. In a very real way, Christmas leads us to face everything that is right and good about our families. It also makes us face the not so good.

The challenge of Christmas is not so much in its busyness or its self-imposed pressures, it's in doing right by family. Let's face it. It is not a perfect world when it comes to family and, particularly, when it comes to family and Christmas. The Hallmark moments are sometimes few and far between.

God Help Us All

God help us all. He wants to, you know. That was his desire for Mary and Joseph. It is his desire for us.

Receiving God's help will take faith. That the way it was for Mary and Joseph. It's not any different for you and me. After all, acting faithfully is the way of Christmas.