Sermon 12-08-19

A Carpenter Named Joseph

**Christmas Though the Eyes of Joseph**

Matthew 13:54-56

**Sermon Starter**

Last Sunday we began our Advent journey with our Hanging of the Greens service. Typically, as we approach Christmas, we focus on Mary the mother of Jesus and on Luke’s account of the Christmas story which is told from her vantage point. We’ll talk about Mary this year, but our real focus is going to be on Joseph, and Matthew’s account of Christmas which is told from his vantage point. No man played a more important role in Jesus’ life than Joseph. Though he was not the biological father of Jesus, he adopted him as his son. He protected him, provided for him, taught and mentored him.

The reason we don’t often hear about Joseph is there is relatively little in the gospels about him. We have a handful of stories and scriptures that mention him. So, we have to read between the lines a bit to fill in the puzzle pieces of his life. But as we do this, there’s more than meets the eye in the New Testament accounts of the life of Joseph.

**I. Joseph in the Early Church**

Beginning in the second century, Christians found themselves longing for more information about Jesus’ childhood and his parents, than we find in the gospels. Some sought to fill in the gaps by writing what scholars call the **GRAPHIC: APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS**. Apocrypha is a Greek word that means obscure or hidden. While Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written in the second half of the first century – between 65 and 90, the apocryphal gospels come much later – the earliest seem to have been written around 150 and some date as late as the 400’s. They are usually attributed to a New Testament figure, James or Mary or Peter or Thomas. There are 27 of them that you can read online at Early Christian Writings.

Most of the stories are fanciful and completely out of character with the Jesus we see in the first century gospels. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, for instance, in chapter 4 verse 1, notes that when Jesus was five years old, **GRAPHIC: He was going through the village…when a boy ran and bumped him on the shoulder. Jesus got angry and said to him, "You won't continue your journey." And all of a sudden, he fell down and died.**When the parents became upset at Joseph accusing Jesus, he made them blind. These kinds of stories are interesting but out of character compared with what we know of Jesus in the gospels.

But it is possible that the earliest of these gospels preserve some traditions that were true. One of these gospels is called the Infancy Gospel of James, or more commonly among scholars, **GRAPHIC: THE PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES.** It was written about AD 150.

By this time the early church had come to see Mary as perpetually a virgin. She was the handmaiden of the Lord, and had given birth to Christ – it seemed beneath her in their minds that she would be intimate with a man after this. Intimacy seemed beneath her, perhaps the way, when we were kids, we could not ever imagine that our grandparents or our parents had ever been intimate. Yet the gospels indicated that Jesus had brothers and sisters. How was this to be explained? The Infancy Gospel of James, and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, and later the History of Joseph the Carpenter, provided an answer.

These told how Mary had been dedicated to God as a little girl; raised by the priests in the temple. When she was 12, the age girls became engaged, they searched for a husband for her who was elderly, who would care for her like a father, but not be intimate with her since she had been dedicated to God. They settled on Joseph, who was a widower with six children. According to the much later History of Joseph the Carpenter, written in the 400’s or 500’s, he was 93 when Jesus was born. He died at the age of 111 when Jesus was 18.

Whether this story is true or not, it fits with what became an official doctrine of the Catholic Church, the perpetual virginity of Mary. It is not only Catholics who believe this, but the Eastern Orthodox churches, and even most of the Protestant Reformers held this view, as did, to my surprise, John Wesley.[[1]](#footnote-1) Today many Protestants reject the idea that Mary was perpetually a virgin and allow that the brothers and sisters mentioned in Matthew 13 were Jesus’ younger brothers and sisters by Mary and Joseph. But a large swath of Christianity holds to the idea that Mary was never intimate with Joseph and that Jesus’ siblings mentioned in gospels were step-brothers and sisters.

You see these two different views of Joseph and Mary’s perpetual virginity in the different ways Joseph is portrayed in art. Consider the images of St. Joseph with the Christ child painted in 1635 by Guido Reni, **GRAPHIC: RENI’S ST. JOSPEH WITH THE INFANT JESUS**. Some portrayed him as a bit younger man, though still old enough to have a previous family by a wife who had died, like de Tovar’s work, **GRAPHIC:**  **de Tovar’s St. Joseph and Child**, or Clemente de Torres, St. Joseph and the infant Jesus, **GRAPHIC: DE TORRES**.

So, Joseph was either an aged man, or he was a 14 to 18-year-old young man who had other children with Mary after the birth of Jesus. If all we had was Matthew and Luke, and there was no concern that Mary being intimate with Joseph in the years after the birth of Jesus somehow diminished her, I think most would see him as a young man. But the second century story is also compatible with the gospel accounts of Joseph and Mary.

Leaving behind this question, let’s look at one piece of biographical information we have about Joseph in the gospels.

**II. Joseph the Carpenter**

Listen again to our text from Matthew 13:54-55, **GRAPHIC: When he came to his hometown, he taught the people in their synagogue. They were surprised and said, “Where did he get this wisdom? Where did he get the power to work miracles? Isn’t he the carpenter’s son?”** In Mark’s telling of this story they name Jesus, too, as a carpenter.

So, we know Joseph was a carpenter. Let’s consider for a few minutes what that tells us about the man. The Greek word translated as carpenter is **GRAPHIC: TEKTON**. The word could mean a variety of things, but it seems most often to have meant someone who worked with wood. Houses were built of stone or mud brick and though a tekton could do this work, there were other words used in Greek for those who built using stone or mud brick. But tektons would have made the doors and shutters. But it is likely that much of their work was in building farm implements, tools, yoke for oxen, and in building furniture, chests and tables.

There were master builders – the word was **GRAPHIC: ARKITEKTON** from which we have our word architect. The arkitekton was both a master craftsman and usually had others working for him. But note that Joseph was not called an arkitekton, just a tekton.

By the way, a document written about 150 by an early church leader we know as Justin Martyr noted of Jesus, which likely tells us of Joseph, that, “He was in the habit of working as a carpenter when among men, making ploughs and yokes.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Justin Martyr, unlike the writers of the apocryphal gospels, is a trustworthy source, and his statements ties in with something Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-29, **GRAPHIC: Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**

**III. Joseph, Jesus and You**

What does it tell us about God that he chose Joseph to serve as Jesus’ father, raising him as his own son? He did not choose a priest, an educated scribe or lawyer, not a physician or successful businessman, not even an arkitekton, just a humble carpenter?

You may remember the wonderful story when God sent Samuel, a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, to Bethlehem, to anoint one of the shepherd Jesse’s sons to be the next king of Israel – the king who would serve as a pattern for the messiah. Jesse brought forth one son after another, starting with the oldest. Samuel saw the oldest, tallest, strongest, handsomest of Jesse’s sons and kept thinking one of these was the man God wanted anointed to be Israel’s next king. But God said, **GRAPHIC: “For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”** In the end, it was the least impressive of Jesse’s sons, by outward appearances – the youngest of his sons who was out tending the sheep – about whom God said, “He’s the one!” In the case of Joseph, God once again chose an unlikely hero for the important job of raising the messiah.

I’d like to end by asking how your father, step father or other men in your life shaped you?

I can imagine that many of you would note how your fathers profoundly shaped your own faith. I can also imagine that just as many of you might say otherwise.

In a blog post written by Lee Strobel, he cited New York University psychologist Paul Vitz’s work. Vitz wrote, “That a child’s psychological representation of his father is intimately connected to his understanding of God was assumed by Freud and has been rather well developed by a number of psychologists, especially psychoanalysts.”

He then went on to list many noted atheists who had a difficult relationship with their fathers, noting, “Disappointment in and resentment of his own father unconsciously justifies his rejection of God.” He wonders, in a time when 26% of millennials note that they have poor or below average relationship with their dads, if there is a connection between this relationship and the number of millennials, particularly young men, who are struggling with the idea of faith in God?

While we have very little written directly about Joseph in the gospels – I believe, we can know a lot about him by looking at his son, and as we do it appears to me that Joseph was intentional about teaching and modeling for Jesus who God is, and what God’s will was for his life.

I wonder, when Jesus tells us to address God as “Abba” – a term that meant something like, “Dad,” if he’s not telling us that he saw in Joseph a picture of the heart and character of God?

When he tells the parable of the Prodigal Son and likens God to the patient and merciful father who took back his son even after the boy had squandered everything he had given him, if he had not seen this in Joseph’s response to one or more of his brothers?

When he spoke of the importance of telling the truth, might he have been describing what he learned by watching Joseph?

When he taught his disciples that true greatness is found in humble service, might he have been describing his carpenter father?

Or when he said that we’re not to look at a woman with lust in our hearts was this part of one of the talks Joseph had with him as a teen?

When he said that we’re to do to others what we want them to do to us, is it possible that he had grown up seeing this value in his dad?

He no doubt learned much in his life from his mother, but I wonder if what we see in Jesus isn’t a reflection of the life and witness of Joseph?

So, what is the point, the “So what?” in today’s message? I think it is, at least in part, that the man whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, was shaped by a man who was, in today’s terms, Jesus’ step-dad, or adoptive dad, some have called him a foster dad. That it seems likely that Joseph intentionally invested in this child, cared for him, and taught him. **GRAPHIC: That thought in turn leads me to ask all parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, but particularly the men here - you who are dad’s, step-dads, adopted dads and grandfathers, how are you intentionally shaping the children entrusted to your care? What are you teaching them about life? What image of God are you painting for them?**

When we cross over into eternity, what will our children and grandchildren say they learned from us? What lessons did we leave them that they can continue to carry with them as they journey through this experience we call life?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, 12-08-19

Matthew 13:54-56

When he came to his hometown, he taught the people in their synagogue. They were surprised and said, “Where did he get this wisdom? Where did he get the power to work miracles? Isn’t he the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother named Mary? Aren’t James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas his brothers? And his sisters, aren’t they here with us? Where did this man get all this?”

1. See Wesley’s “Letter to a Roman Catholic,” section 7, subparagraph 3 – this was written in 1749. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho, chapter 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)