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Advent 4A – December 18, 2016

At this time of year, Mary gets a lot of attention. She is the Mother of God, after all. But, don't you feel just a little sorry for Joseph? He seems to get the short shrift in our religious and spiritual lives. So, when this Gospel comes up every three years a part of me smiles. It's the one time in the whole three year liturgical cycle that Joseph gets a little more attention. And the lessons we can gain from Joseph and how he responded to God's call give us a deeper perspective on our own spiritual journeys.

Historically speaking we know almost nothing about Jesus' birth and childhood. We know he was born of Mary, Joseph was his father, and he grew up in Nazareth. The New Testament gives us very little to go on. Paul's letters are the earliest writings we have, and they don't mention Mary or Joseph. Mark is the earliest Gospel we have, and it starts in Jesus' adulthood and never even mentions Joseph. Luke and Matthew are the most detailed accounts and they differ in many ways. John only mentions Joseph once. And all of these texts came together between 25 and 50 years after Jesus was gone.

What this shows is that the first generation of Christians didn't seem all that concerned about Jesus' origins. However, once the first generation of Christians had passed, there was a veritable explosion of Jesus stories. You would be amazed at the number and variety of birth and childhood stories of Jesus, not more than a few which survive as Apocryphal writings. These writings show that that the Christians of the third through sixth centuries were very interested in depicting Mary, Joseph, and even Jesus as very human and very much like themselves. Some of these details come down to us today through art and music— the number and names of the Wise Men and the presence of various animals in the stable, details about Mary and Joseph's lives before Jesus. Medieval paintings show some of those details. Also, carols and hymns give little hints of some those details.

There's an old English carol that gives us a glimpse of what some early Christians thought of Joseph's situation as the husband of a pregnant woman, whose child was not his own. In the Cherry Tree Carol, Joseph, described as an old man, is travelling with his pregnant wife Mary to Bethlehem for the census. On the way she sees cherries in a tree and begs Joseph to stop and get them for her. Joseph, with some resentment at their situation, says, "Why don't you ask the father of the child in your womb to climb up and get them?!?" Now, that's just the sort of snarky thing one would expect a man to say, isn't it? Of course, the unborn Jesus hears this and commands his Father from the womb to lower the branches so Mother Mary can sample the cherries. The details in this 13<sup>th</sup> century ballad, come from a 3<sup>rd</sup> century apocryphal story of Jesus from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Except, in Pseudo-Matthew the baby Jesus is already born, they're fleeing to Egypt, and Joseph is portrayed as annoyed because Mary is more concerned about getting dates from a palm than their lack of water. In that story, Jesus also intervenes, and the angels lower the dates for Mary.

This story and song colorfully illustrate how early Christians tackled the very real issues surrounding Jesus birth' and life. Over the centuries as the halos started to form over Joseph and Mary, we've lost connection to the very human experience of how Joseph dealt with this problematic pregnancy. And it is in the very human reactions of Joseph and Mary that we get a glimpse into the God life that Jesus' whole birth is meant to teach us.

Joseph is a good example of male spirituality, which is practical and steadfast. But, the life of the spirit is not very predictable. God calls us to lead ordered and disciplined lives, but often throws chaos in the mix to ensure that love is our guide, not just the law. Now I don't want to come off as sexist here, and stereotype spiritual lives of men and women.

There are elements of female spirituality in many men I've known, and I've known many women who had male elements to their spiritual lives. But, I think Joseph's experience shows some of the more positive traits one might find in the male spiritual experience.

Joseph was a practical man – the Gospel says righteous. He followed the appropriate course for his time, taking a young woman in betrothal, entering into the marriage contract. But then, he found himself at odds

when his commitment was hampered by a significant wrinkle. His betrothed was pregnant. This was a huge problem in first century Palestine. Since the marriage contract was just as much a business contract as a contract of relationship, the woman considered a piece of property traded between families – Mary’s pregnancy constituted a major breach of this contract. Deuteronomic Code was very specific about what Joseph was supposed to do - He would have to have her examined, and according to the law, ***If...this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman’s virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father’s house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.***

This is the righteous act Joseph was supposed to carry out.

But, Joseph didn’t want to bring disgrace on Mary or her family.

However, divorcing her quietly, as he wanted to do, may not have been all that easy. At least two other people would have had to be involved in the proceedings, Mary’s father and a Levite. Eventually, the details would have emerged, and either Joseph would have been humiliated as a wronged husband, or he would have been vilified as one who defiled a young woman and would not marry her. None of Joseph’s choices were good. But, he wanted to do the right thing.

Then, an angel came to Joseph in a dream adding another wrinkle to his dilemma. And, just like many men, his practical and steadfast intentions were completely shaken up by the chaos of love. So, Joseph listened what the Angel said. And, at this point I can imagine him wandering the countryside for a few days, muttering to himself, just like Tevye in the Fiddler on the Roof. And then, coming to the decision that he would stick by Mary, whatever the consequences.

And stick he did. Imagine the tongue-wagging and ridicule he must have endured. But, once he’d made the decision, moved by the Holy Spirit, he was steadfast, caring for Mary and Jesus as his own, protecting them, providing for them. Joseph took, what seemed like a disastrous situation, embraced it, and allowed God’s grace to make it good.

Joseph was a righteous man; he knew and followed the law. But he also was open to the truth beneath the law, which meant being open to the

workings of the Holy Spirit. Taking Mary as his wife and raising Jesus as his own, exemplifies this. Joseph, righteous and practical throughout Jesus' life had to balance law and love. As the Gospel of Luke tells us he fulfilled his duty by presenting his firstborn in the Temple. I can imagine there were many other instances as Jesus grew into manhood, where Joseph had to be open to the Spirit working in their family, following tradition but making allowances. That's why Joseph makes an excellent patron saint of the family – in families, though parents know that order and discipline are important, they also know that life is not always well-ordered. The wise parent, knows that when presented with what might seem like disaster on the surface we have to be open to the workings of the Spirit so that the good can come out of the chaos of life. Like Tevye in the Fiddler on the Roof, Joseph balanced tradition and turbulence, by searching for the love of God in the chaos of life.

As we come to Christmas, when we are once again before that all-too familiar scene in the stable, let us remember Joseph – righteous, practical, steadfast – and open to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the life of his family.