

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 30, 2018
Calm and Bright
Title: What is Being Born in Us?
Scripture: Revelation 21:1-6a
Matthew 1:18-24

You may think that Christmas is over – and, indeed, Valentine gifts have already been spotted in stores. Yet, we are in a very short season – only 12 days long – that is called Christmastide. It begins Christmas Eve and continues through next Sunday – January 6th – Epiphany. It gives us a little extra time to sing Christmas carols and to focus on some other parts of the Christmas story. Today we are thinking about Joseph, and next week the Magi or Wise Men.

Joseph doesn't often hold a prominent part in the Christmas story. Ann Weems in her book, Kneeling in Bethlehem, has a wonderful poem about Joseph called, "Getting to the Front of the Stable".ⁱ She begins with these words, "Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?

Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,
and told him to stand at the back of the creche,
background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?"

Joseph does tend to get lost in the Christmas story. He is found in the second chapter of Matthew's gospel where he does play an important part. In the short space of one chapter, Joseph makes some very important decisions that keep Jesus safe and each of those decisions are guided by an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream.

The first decision Joseph makes tells us a lot about Joseph and comes before any of his dreams or visits from angels. Joseph, like

everyone else we have encountered in the Christmas story, is an ordinary man. He was a carpenter, living in the small village of Nazareth and he is described as a righteous man.

He was engaged to Mary but before they were legally married, he discovered that Mary was pregnant. Engagement in Joseph's time was a binding legal arrangement and the only way that an engagement could be broken was through death or legal action – essentially a divorce. The obvious explanation for Mary's pregnancy was that she had been unfaithful. Joseph must have felt personally betrayed, but he had to look at his legal options. He could denounce Mary and she might face death by stoning, or more likely he could publicly divorce her. This would have resulted in her being shamed, her reputation ruined and both she and her child being branded as outcasts.

Joseph's response tells us a lot about him. Think for a minute about what your response might have been – or what it has been – when your trust has been betrayed. Is your impulse to get angry and to seek revenge? Do you want to punish the person who let you down? Has it caused embarrassment or harm to you or your reputation? People can count, and it wouldn't take much to realize that Mary had gotten pregnant before the actual marriage took place. The assumption, of course, would have been that Joseph was the father and his reputation would also have been tarnished.

Joseph was in a no-win situation; but he didn't seek revenge. He didn't try to protect his own name. Instead of putting himself first, he got his ego out of the way and put Mary first. He couldn't in good conscience go ahead with the wedding, but he also couldn't bring himself to humiliate

Mary or even consider having her put to death.ⁱⁱ He decided to divorce Mary quietly.

Often the way we respond to a situation is influenced by the way we were raised, and I wonder if Joseph's decision was influenced by his ancestry. Matthew's gospel begins with a long list of family genealogy beginning with Abraham, going through King David, and finally arriving at Joseph. In this long list of names, there are four that especially stand out and practically scream for attention. In the long list of men's names, there are four women – very unusual for a Biblical genealogy.

What is even more unusual is who the four women were. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. One of them was a prostitute and Bathsheba is the only one who might have been an Israelite, the others were all Gentiles. In any event, Bathsheba was also married to a Gentile. All four women held important roles in Jewish history. Their presence and their history show God's great care for people as well as the way that God works in and through the most surprising people.

Maybe Joseph knew about God's care, mercy and love for all persons because he had heard stories of his family ancestry growing up. Maybe this was why he was more concerned about Mary than about himself. Maybe this was why he decided to quietly call off the wedding.

However, before Joseph could do that, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, that Mary had not been unfaithful to him, and that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was told to name the child Jesus which means "deliverance" or "salvation" because Jesus would save his people from their sins.

Dreams would play an important part in the way that God communicates in Matthew's gospel. Except for two dreams – Pilate's wife and the Magi – all of the dreams are Joseph's. These angels led him into an uncharted and unplanned future. After the first dream he would follow through with his marriage to Mary. After the birth, he named the baby Jesus as the angel said.

This is important because in doing so, Joseph was claiming the child as his, even though he was not the biological father. He was, essentially, adopting Jesus. By doing this and by naming him, he also made Jesus part of the royal line of King David.

Ann Weems poem continues:

*God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful
in spite of the gossip in Nazareth,
in spite of the danger from Herod.
This man, Joseph, listened to angels
and it was he who named the Child
Emmanuel.*

Later, Joseph would be warned in a dream that the child's life was in danger. He and Mary would flee to Egypt in order to save their baby's life. After King Herod died, an angel appeared to Joseph in another dream and told him to take Jesus and Mary back to Israel. He learned that the new king was cruel, and he was afraid. Once again, he was warned in another dream to go to Galilee to the city of Nazareth.

Nothing went the way that Joseph had planned, but after his initial decision to show mercy to Mary, he was led every step of the way by an angel appearing to him in a dream. God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of Jesus – a man who was not rich or famous. God chose a working-class man from a small town – a town that most considered to be a

backward village. Later when Jesus was older and started to preach, there were those who asked, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

God doesn’t look for rich or famous. God doesn’t look for successful as the world defines success. “What counts with God is not what you have or what you have done, but who you are and who you are becoming.”ⁱⁱⁱ God looks at our heart – at the person we really are.

Joseph was a man of integrity – a man who trusted God and who responded to the messages from the angels. Joseph was a man who was willing to step out in faith into uncharted territory to something he couldn’t have imagined and certainly wouldn’t have chosen at the time.

One of the commentators I read this week observed, that this is not a virgin story, but rather a vision story. She pointed out that Joseph, the dreamer, trusts relationships more than rules and that in this story, we 21st century disciples can discover fresh insight about living and believing in highly anxious times.^{iv}

While we do not face the same situation that Joseph faced, there are many ways that we can connect with Joseph. We, too, live in an age of anxiety. We see it in the news every day, but even when we come to church we do not escape to an alternate reality where everything is great.

Like most mainline Protestant churches, we find ourselves in a culture where mainline churches are generally experiencing decline. Indeed, membership and worship attendance in the United Methodist Church and in many other mainline denominations has been declining for many years.

Here at Wesley, there are fewer people in worship and fewer children in Sunday School than when I was a child. I remember Sundays

when we would sing a special song because there had been 100 people in Sunday School. Today, that would be a dream.

We find ourselves like other churches dealing with problems for which we don't have answers. Pews have more and more empty spaces on Sundays. Young people seem to have wandered away. Young parents are stressed and for many Sunday morning worship is not a top priority.

However, rather than becoming discouraged, it might be better for us to look to Joseph the dreamer. It might be better for us to realize that when we have the most anxiety, when we feel the most confused and have the most questions, this may be the time when we can be most open and surprised by God's presence. We might ask, what God is planning to birth into our lives today.

Walter Brueggemann, a great theologian, says that dreams are the way that God frees us and rebirths us and pushes us into new life. Joseph was confused, scared, questioning, and wanting to do what was right – and an angel came to him with a new path, a new vision, a new way of seeing what he thought had been obvious. An angel came offering him a solution that he hadn't considered – a path through uncharted territory.^v

A couple of years ago, we celebrated our 50th anniversary as a church that had been birthed from three other churches. At the time, we celebrated where we had been and what we had done. We also asked, where God was calling us to go, what God was calling us to be, for the next 50 years.

Although Joseph made a decision that was merciful and showed his commitment to relationships rather than rules and his commitment to love and mercy rather than judgment, his decision didn't go quite far enough, and an angel came to show him a different possibility.

Joseph's family tree taught him that God is full of mercy and that God calls us towards freedom and life. I believe strongly, that God loves each and every one of us just as we are, but God also invites us to continue to grow, to become more like the people that God knows we can become. I believe that God does the same thing with churches and communities of people. God celebrates the things we have done; the ways we have been faithful and at the same time, God calls us to continue to grow. God calls us to keep going deeper – to spread our roots so that we have a firm foundation. God calls us to be open to dreams of vision and possibilities.

God called Mary and Joseph into new possibilities in their lives – and God calls each of us, individually and corporately, into new possibilities. When we are feeling anxious and overwhelmed, God invites us to be still and open to the possibilities and the amazing ways that God surprises us. God seeks to birth new ideas and new possibilities in us and among us.

Ann Weems concludes her poem about Joseph by asking:

*Is this a man to be stuck for centuries
in the back of the stable?
Actually, Joseph probably stood in the doorway
guarding the mother and child
or greeting shepherds or kings.*

*When he wasn't in the doorway,
he was probably urging Mary to get some rest,
gently covering her with his cloak,
assuring her that he would watch the Child.*

*Actually he probably picked the Child up in his arms
and walked him in the night,
patting him lovingly
until he closed his eyes.*

She concludes with an invitation and suggestion:

*This Christmas, let us give thanks to God
for this man of incredible faith
into whose care God placed the Christ Child.
As a gesture of gratitude,
let's put Joseph in the front of the stable
where he can guard and greet
and cast an occasional glance
at this Child
who brought us life.*

Let us, like Joseph, be open to dreams, to new visions, new possibilities in our lives and in our ministry. Let us, like Joseph, look to the child who brought us life and continues to be born in us and bring new life to us every day.

ⁱ Weems, Ann. "Getting to the Front of the Stable" in Kneeling in Bethlehem, pp. 52-53

ⁱⁱ McLarty, Dr. Philip W. "The Faithfulness of Joseph" www.sermonwriter.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Petticrew, James. "The Unsung Hero of Christmas" 12/22/01, www.sermoncentral.com

^{iv} Andrews, Susan R. Pastoral Perspective, on Matthew 1:18-24. Feasting the Gospels, Matthew Volume 1.

^v Ibid