

December 9, 2007  
Matthew 1:18-25  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *Out of the Shadows*

The Christmas cards are beginning to arrive, with all the multiplicity of scenes and images we associate with this season. Maybe you noticed the large Christmas card at each door as you came in. Last Sunday the youth group made these two cards. Those who wish to sign these cards as a greeting to others in the congregation are invited to do so and to contribute what you would have spent on sending cards to others in the congregation to a fund that helps local teens.

Needless to say, as cards arrive at our house, I'm particularly interested in the ones that portray a nativity scene. One card we received a few years ago I've kept. It is a copy of a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting entitled the "Adoration of the Shepherds" (by Bartolomeo Esteban Murillo). The painting is a rather traditional stable setting, with a cow, a donkey, a couple of hens, and a sheep, which has come with the shepherds who are gathered around the manger. A shaft of light shines through the roof illuminating the baby who is lying on a bright white cloth in the manger. Leaning over the child, and apparently wrapping him in the cloths, is his mother Mary, whose face is also illuminated by the light. Mother and child are the focal point of the painting. Back in the shadows, adorned in the darkest clothing, so that he almost blends into the background, is Joseph. At first glance, he's easy to miss. The problem is that in much of our tradition, he is missing.

One pastor, remembering his experience as a teenager of being recruited for the Christmas pageant, tells of how the two women who were directing the pageant recruited him for the "lead role," so they said. Then they taught him how to do it right. He was to have his eyes down, one hand on Mary's shoulder, the other out in a receptive manner as though welcoming others and then the instructions were simple and clear: don't move and don't say anything. As he put it, he was *the only person in the pageant unmoving and unmoved, the lead role become part of the scenery.* (James Dittes, *The Male Predicament*, p. 3) In other words, he was Joseph.

Over the years in directing Christmas pageants I've found that there are always a multitude of girls who want to play Mary and usually no boys who want to be Joseph, especially if you are dealing with adolescents. In the humorous children's book, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, the preacher's son, who was always forced to be Joseph, said he even offered to pay one of the other boys to be Joseph but to no avail. Who wants a part where you "don't move and don't say anything?"

In the Bible, there are four gospels, books which each give an accounting of Jesus' life. Two of those- Mark and John – don't have Christmas stories. Luke and Matthew do each have a Christmas story, although they are different. One of the differences is the perspective from which the story is told. In Luke, the story is told

through Mary. This is the story with which we are most familiar. The gospel of Matthew, on the other hand, brings Joseph out of the shadows and tells the story through his eyes.

Matthew begins his gospel by tracing the genealogy of Jesus – beginning with Abraham, down through King David, down to Joseph. However you personally understand the varying references to and interpretations of Jesus' conception found in the Bible, clearly Joseph was, at least, called to be Jesus' earthly father.

So, what kind of man was Joseph? There is only one word used to describe Joseph in today's reading. It says he was a "just (or righteous)" man. In Matthew's setting, to be "just" meant to live by the law. The Law of Moses required capital punishment for people found in Mary's condition. *Although, by the time of Matthew, this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating.* (New Interpreter's Bible, VIII, p. 134)

We are told that Joseph is the kind of man who wants to "do the right thing." But clearly he is also the kind of man who knows that "doing the right thing" doesn't always mean following the letter of the law. He is a man with a compassionate heart and an open spirit. Even before the angel appears to him in a dream Joseph has resolved to divorce Mary quietly. Then the angel comes to him and calls him to a very special ministry - the ministry of fatherhood. "You shall take Mary as your wife...she will bear a son and you shall name him Jesus because he will save." A noble calling for a noble man.

Unlike most Christmas pageants today, where Joseph is told "don't move and don't say anything," in Matthew's gospel,

Joseph is the one who takes action. Like his ancestor Joseph from the book of Genesis, this Joseph also listens to dreams. In fact, he has four dreams and acts on each of them.

In the first dream, which we heard in today's reading, Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife, which he does. And he names the baby Jesus. If you continue reading in Matthew, we see that Joseph is told in a second dream that it is not safe to stay in Bethlehem. So he takes his family to Egypt. Then when the awful King Herod dies, Joseph is told in a third dream that it is time to return home, so he does. However, as they get closer to home, Joseph is warned in a fourth dream that it is safer to go to Galilee to a town called Nazareth. So that is where he takes his family to live.

Joseph is just and compassionate. Joseph is steadfast and also adaptable. Joseph listens to and holds on to God's dreams and makes them his dreams.

Langston Hughes once wrote:

*Hold Fast to Dreams  
for if dreams die  
Life is a  
Broken Winged Bird  
that cannot fly.*

Joseph holds fast to God's dreams and he holds fast to Jesus' life so that God's dreams may take wing in him. What more could God ask for from a parent?

Once when I asked a group of young people, "What is a father?" one of them made this profound statement, "A father accepts responsibility for his children, whether they are biologically his or not; and he cares for his children and isn't afraid to show it."

Many fathers today come to that calling not only through biology, but also through adoption and step parenting. And some find themselves to be single parents. In whatever manner children come into a man's life, a father accepts responsibility for his children, cares for them and isn't afraid to show it.

In a world were too many fathers are nowhere to be found, and many others are emotionally distant, I think we are very unwise to keep Joseph in the shadows. I once came across an order of nuns named the Sisters of Mary AND Joseph. All their artwork shows the whole holy family – Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Being a father is a noble calling, a calling of which the world is much in need.

In the book *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, the authors (Dan Kindlon & Michael Thompson) say that it has been their experience that although many men are resistant to crying, in therapy, when men do cry most often it is about their fathers, whether the man was hated or revered, alive or dead. (p. 94.) In other words, men should never underestimate the impact they are having on their children's lives. In this season of festivities, which it seems in our culture is often given over to the needs and desires of women and children maybe we should ask the men in our lives about what it means to them to prepare for the coming Christ Child.

I found a poem written by a man who was awaiting the birth of his son. I wonder if this might touch on some of Joseph's feelings as he awaited the birth of the child he was to call Jesus, the one who saves.

### *Come Out and Play*

*My hearts seems to beat a little faster  
these days  
Maybe it's the thought of my life changing  
in so many ways  
I've heard so many tales of sleepless  
nights  
And tests of patience taken to new heights*

*Yet my excitement grows as we count  
down each week  
For I know soon we will finally meet*

*I have a little fear I must admit  
Will I be good at it?*

...  
*Can I slay the monster under your bed?  
Will we be able to build a sled?*

*How will I explain the birds and the bees?  
Oh, I must have a million of these*

*Answers to questions, questions to ponder  
Things to see, places to wander*

*Together, we'll be the ultimate team  
Limited only by what we can dream*

...  
(Brad Lawson, 1998)

I have another Christmas card with me today. It is a very different one from the one I described earlier. The painting on the front is by Sr. Richard Mehren from the 20<sup>th</sup> century (found on a card printed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of LaGrange.) It is a painting with only two characters - Jesus and Joseph, with the baby Jesus riding high on Joseph's back, holding on tight. Both their heads are aglow and their faces are snuggled together. Inside it says,  
*The Dream of God shall be carried  
in strong hearts and gentle hands.*

I wonder how shall we carry the dream of God?