The Story of Joseph, or When Doing the Right Thing Isn't Enough
a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on December 18, 2022
based on Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Linda Loving tells a personal story about her sister's family. It was a few days before Christmas, and Linda's niece, Megan, age four, was drawing a picture of the nativity. It's important to keep four-year-olds busy before Christmas. What better project than drawing a picture of the Bethlehem stable. So little Megan was working intently. She stayed with it for a long time, and when she finished she showed it to her mother.

Megan carefully explained each figure: the shepherds, the sheep, the three wise guys and their loaded camels, the stable complete with cows, a cat and a dog thrown in as well, and, of course, in the center of it, Mary and the baby.

Her mother noticed that something was missing. "Where's Joseph?" she asked. She assumed Megan would remember and sketch him in. Instead, Megan gave her mother the stink eye and said, "Who needs Joseph?"

Megan clearly has the makings of a feminist theologian. She's right. Joseph's role in the nativity is secondary at best. He's not much more than a prop in the manger scene. He stands solemnly and inconspicuously in the background. There isn't much literature about him.

Search the hymnal. You'll find maybe one or two mentions of Joseph.

The Bible doesn't say much about him apart from the nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke. Other than one incident when Jesus is twelve and his parents take him to Jerusalem for the Passover, Joseph is never mentioned again. And yet tradition holds that what he does appears to be formative for his son, Jesus.

According to Matthew, Joseph doesn't have to be Jesus's dad, he *chooses* to, and in the midst of unusual circumstances. Let's review.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a town of no more than 200 during his lifetime. Far flung, rural, unsophisticated. But just 3 miles away lay the bustling Roman city of Sepphoris. Sepphoris was the Roman capital of Galilee. It was beautiful, with colonnaded streets, a forum, an imposing theater that was renovated in Jesus's lifetime. There was also a palace of sorts and resplendent villas.

So, maybe Jesus was not the rube many scholars used to think he was, growing up in Nazareth – which is, frankly, the Galilean equal of Drain, Oregon. Perhaps he went to the theater and saw a play or two. Interestingly, Jesus uses the word hypocrite to describe scribes and Pharisees.

Well, "hypocrite" in New Testament Greek means "stage actor," so the concept of theater was definitely familiar to him.

One thing is sure, there was plenty of work in Sepphoris. 25,000 people lived there when Jesus was growing up.

Joseph, remember, is called, a carpenter. He's portrayed as a skilled woodworker, and, you know, maybe he was. However, the Greek term for that also means day-laborer. I imagine him walking the three miles to the neighboring city each morning and back home each night doing grunt work in the city. Perhaps Jesus did the same thing in his teens and twenties. We don't know.

From the gospels we can surmise that Jesus, at his mother's knee (if not his father's knee) learned to speak his principle language, Aramaic. He also knew some Hebrew, maybe a little Greek, and enough Latin to read Roman road signs.

Matthew's version of the story has it that Mary and Joseph were betrothed – which is a legal arrangement. There's nothing in the gospel to tell us there was anything more to it than that.

Then Mary is found to be "with child." Did she tell this man she was promised to? She must have. Can you imagine that conversation? "I'm pregnant, Jospeh, and you and I both know you're not the father."

We don't hear much of Joseph's side of the story except to surmise that he was disappointed, maybe angry. A contract has been violated. Technically there can be very serious consequences including stoning but that must have been very rare if it happened at all. As now, people most often just got on with their lives.

Joseph apparently cares enough about Mary that he decides against a public announcement. Instead he decides to cancel the agreement quietly, (no fussing). Let the world say what it wants.

But then the dreams start, the feverish tossing and turning, the half-imagined angel voice: "Do not be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary for your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Will Willimon quips that while there is a lot of annunciation art describing the angel and serene Mary, there is little if any art focused on Joseph's dream: "Joseph bolting upright in bed in a cold sweat after being told his fiancée is pregnant, and not by him, and he should marry her anyway. They don't tell you this part of the Christmas story in Sunday school."

One of the quiet miracles in the whole story is that on the basis of that dream, Joseph does something unlikely, something almost outrageous. He intentionally lays aside his conventions, his sense of right and wrong. He intentionally puts aside his ego, his wounded manhood, and marries his pregnant fiancée.

Was he sure Mary was on-the-level? Romantics will conclude that Joseph totally trusted the dream, never for a minute doubted, but I'm not so sure.

In any case, they marry, day laborer, Joseph and pregnant Mary. And when she is at term, tradition has it that they have to travel the ninety miles to his ancestral home, Bethlehem, the city of David, for a census. There Jesus is born in a stable behind a crowded inn.

Honestly, it doesn't sound very likely, taking Mary away from her extended family at the moment she needs them the most. I mean, look, giving birth is very dangerous. It's a life and death experience for women.

Even under Roman edict would Mary's family let her go at such a time? That's the official story but its written by men, you know. My thought is that Mary's mother, sisters, aunts and female cousins moved in, surrounded Mary and said, "She's not going anywhere. We're staying right here in Nazareth."

I mean when it came to birthing, women did all the heavy lifting.

My father waited for my birth in a waiting room at Sutter maternity Hospital in Sacramento, California: a small, ugly room with a few vinyl covered chairs and a table with copies of *Time* and *Field and Stream* magazine and ashtrays overflowing.

We're told that Joseph, first and foremost, is "a righteous man." It's not a word we throw around very much these days, is it?

In the Old Testament, righteousness can be defined as a desire to live a pure undefiled life by keeping clear of sinners and outcasts. That's interesting because Jesus had no time for such an exclusive ethic.

I mean, Jesus chose to sit down to dinner with tax collectors; he welcomed sex workers to his parties and he did this openly, as if intending to set a new standard for righteous behavior.

Where the righteousness that comes before Jesus is defined as staying out of jail, the righteousness Jesus speaks of is a willingness to sit beside the prisoner.

Joseph chooses to do "the right thing" – and . . . the right thing he chooses to do will not in any way involve heaping any shame onto Mary. That is Joseph's supreme resolve and it is entirely in tune with his son, Jesus's ethic.

You know, Joseph never pronounces nor denounces. In fact, he never says a single word. Mary sings a Magnificat, and Joseph is merely a benevolent protective presence in the story.

His witness is all in what he does and never in what he says. He obeys the divine summons to take the child and mother and flee to Egypt. And later to return and settle in Nazareth. All without a word. New Testament scholar Dale Brunner says the advent of Jesus "was a nightmare, a tongue tying embarrassment, a befuddling shock which required a quiet rethink of everything upon which life is based, a challenge to come forward and commit, to allow God to work righteousness through us, despite us, rather than to attempt to make righteousness an act of our own."

Joseph merely responded as some of you have responded to people in trouble, almost automatically, when you sensed God, or at least something bigger than you, tugging at your heart, tugging you into a future you hadn't imagined even a moment before.

Listen to this first-person story from Cecile Gilmer (NPR) She writes . . .

I believe that families are not only blood relatives, but sometimes just people that show up and love you when no one else will.

In May 1977, I lived in a Howard Johnson's motel off of Interstate 10 in Houston. My dad and I shared a room with two double beds and a bathroom way too small for a modest 15-year-old girl and her father. Dad's second marriage was in trouble and my stepmother had kicked us both out of the house the previous week. Dad had no idea what to do with me. And that's when my other family showed up.

Barbara and Roland Beach took me into their home because their only daughter, Sue, my best friend, asked them to. I lived with them for the next seven years.

Barb starched my drill team skirts same as Sue's. She made sure I had lunch money, doctors' appointments, help with homework, Jordache jeans, puka shell necklaces and nightly hugs.

Barbara and Roland attended every football game where Sue and I marched, every drama performance I was in even when I only had a non-speaking part. As far as I could tell, for the Beaches, there was no difference between Sue and me: I was their daughter, too.

When Sue and I left for rival colleges, they kept my room the same for the entire four years I attended school.

The Beaches knew all about me when they took me in. When I was seven, my mother died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound and from then on my father relied on other people to raise his kids.

By the time I went to live with the Beaches, I believed that life was entirely unfair and that love was tenuous and untrustworthy. I believed that the only person who would take care of me was me.

Without the Beaches, I would have become a bitter, cynical woman. They gave me a home that allowed me to grow and change. They kept me from being paralyzed by my past, and gave me the confidence to open my heart.

I believe in family. For me, it wasn't the family that was there on the day I was born, but the one that was there for me when I was living in a Howard Johnson's on Interstate 10.

The example of Joseph, Jesus's adopted father, pushes us out of our personal comfort zones and asks us to rethink what it means to be a moral person.

He was a righteous man. He lived his life by the rule book, the religious law. But when it came to Mary, the rules didn't work.

And so Joseph becomes the first practitioner of the new morality of Jesus in which love is central and kindness and compassion challenge and change conventions and custom and religious rules.

Maybe it was from Joseph that Jesus learned the limits of legalism in religion and the power of love – just like the day Jesus healed a man on the sabbath or stepped in and saved a woman about to be stoned for adultery.

Joseph also teaches us to pay more attention to our dreams, to listen to the wisdom of our hearts as well as our minds. Morton Kelsey wrote about Joseph: "Saints are those who follow their deepest inner promptings," he says, "even when they make no worldly sense."

That's what Christmas is about, finally: an unlikely, irrational, unexplainable appearance of love in the midst of the world's harshest realities; an invitation to do what Joseph did, to bet on our dearest dreams and give our hearts away to our most precious hopes; to let go of reasonableness and convention and respond in extravagant generosity with the deepest love of our hearts to those God has put in our path.

Sometimes God's work is quietly assuming responsibility, changing diapers, preparing meals, taking care of the baby; going to work every day, doing your job; taking care of an aging, lonely parent; patiently standing with a troubled youngster.

So, "Hail Mary," and "Hail Joseph, too. "

Amen