

## "Advent Action: The Story of Joseph" Matthew 1:18-25

December 14, 2011

Advent 3

During our special Advent worship services, we have considered the stories of two women: Elizabeth and Mary. But there was a man in this story who had a very important part: Joseph. He was a carpenter from Nazareth who was looking forward to his wedding to Mary. Tonight, let us consider his perspective on this story.

Imagine Joseph's feelings. One day, he is working to make a chair, a table, maybe even a wedding gift for his beloved Mary. Mary comes into his shop and begins to speak, "Joseph, I need to tell you something...." Joseph's life was about to change forever. He heard her say, "I'm pregnant," and his emotions exploded: shock, anger, and pain. Then he heard her explanation, "An angel appeared to me and said that I will become pregnant. My baby will be the Son of God." More feelings came out: disbelief, disgust, and more anger. Joseph couldn't deal with this. He ran out, leaving Mary, hurt and crying.

Joseph walked and thought, "How could Mary do this?" Joseph had struggled to control his sexual desires during their engagement and had vowed to wait until after marriage, but Mary clearly had not waited. And her explanation – an angel coming, God making her pregnant, giving birth to the Son of God. That just added insult to injury. Who could believe that?

Joseph was a man of action. He had to do something, but what? Should he bring Mary to the village leaders and accuse her of adultery? Should he demand that the villagers stone Mary to death? That was his right to do. That would fulfill (obey) God's Law and protect his reputation.

But Joseph could not take that action. He loved Mary too much. His actions show that. Even though his heart was broken, he could not react with anger against Mary. What to do then? This righteous man would break the relationship quietly. He would write a bill of divorce, give it to Mary, and then get on with his lonely life.

Joseph walked back to his house. He sat down and sadly wrote out a bill of divorce. The next day, he would get two witnesses to watch, give the paper to Mary, and everything would be over. Then he went to bed and fell into a fitful sleep.

But Joseph dreamed. An angel appeared and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” This is very odd. The angel does not say, “Don’t be afraid of me.”. He says, “Don’t be afraid of the situation – what has happened to Mary and to you. Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife for here baby is from the Holy Spirit. She has not cheated (adultery). She is a pregnant virgin. She will bear a son and you will call His name Jesus because He will save His people from their sins.”

How would Joseph accept this message? What would he do? The message had power to change Joseph’s behavior. First, he changed from doubt and disbelief to faith. Joseph believed the angel’s message. Secondly, Joseph acted on his belief. He got the bill of divorce and tore it up. He ran to Mary and apologized, “I’m sorry. I didn’t understand. But God’s angel showed me the truth and I believe.” Third, Joseph obeyed the messenger. He took Mary for his wife and brought her home, but did not have sexual relations until she gave birth. Joseph continued to demonstrate his faith through his actions. He obeyed the Law and had Jesus circumcized. He brought Jesus and Mary to the temple for purification ceremony. When Jesus’ life was in danger because of King Herod, Joseph obeyed God and brought his family to Egypt.

This little Baby changed Joseph. This Savior inspired Joseph’s life and actions. That Baby, our Savior, changes us in the same way.

He came to save us from our sins. That was not an easy task and did not happen merely because Jesus was born. This cute little baby had to grow up and take our place under God’s Law, always obeying and never sinning, so that we might become saints. His perfect obedience is given to us and His holiness covers us when we were baptized.

That cute little baby had to grown into a man so that He might be nailed to the cross and accept the punishment for our sins – suffering and dying there – so that we might become forgiven

sinner. His complete suffering – in body and soul – God accepts as the punishment for each and every one of our sins. He gives us that forgiveness daily through His Word (Bible), through the mouth of a preacher, and in bread and wine in Holy Communion.

That changes our life and moves us to action. When Jesus came into Joseph's life, he could never live the same way. He believed in God's plan and acted obediently to it. In the same way, when Jesus comes into our lives, we can never live the same way again. We believe God's plan and seek to live according to it.

God's plans may surprise us. His plans surprised Joseph. Joseph knew about God's plan to send a Messiah. He believed the prophecies and believed the Messiah would come. But – the Messiah born from his fiancée in his family – he never expected that. That surprised Him. Yet God revealed the truth to Joseph and he believed.

God's plans surprise us. We know that God loves all people and forgives sinners. But – God loving each of you individually enough to send His Son and Jesus' blood shed 2,000 years ago washing away your sins and forgiving you – you may not expect that. That surprises us. Yet God reveals that truth to us His Word (Bible) and, by the Holy Spirit's power, we believe that plan. God continues to surprise us with His love, mercy, care, and gifts.

Believing His plan is one thing. Living His plan is another. Following God's plan can disrupt our lives. He calls us to live very differently from the world's ways. Remember Joseph. When his fiancée was pregnant and that was not his child, Joseph could have required Mary to be stoned to death. Or, he could have humiliated her. He could have abandoned her. But God's plan called for him to live in a very different way. He took Mary for his wife and raised her child. His life was totally disrupted – leaving Nazareth to go to Bethlehem; from Bethlehem to Egypt; and back again. Joseph endured the challenges, the gossip, the jokes, and embarrassment because God's call moved him to action.

God's call in our life means giving up our rights and not thinking only of ourselves. God's call means not serving ourselves, but serving others. God's call for our lives means enduring challenges,

mocking, and embarrassment from others in order to faithfully follow God's plan. We do not always do that perfectly. Joseph was not perfect either. He depended upon God's forgiveness, the renewal of His life by the Holy Spirit, and His power to go on. We depend on those things, too.

We need more people like Joseph – people who will hear the Word of God and believe, even if it does not make sense; people who are not afraid to do the right thing even if it opposes the world's ways; people who are willing to show their faith belief through action. What is God calling you to believe? What right thing is God calling you to do? How is God calling you to show your faith in action?

It may seem difficult, even impossible, but remember Joseph's situation: shame and embarrassment before he submitted to the will of God and then suffering, mocking, and persecution after he submitted to God's will. Yet Joseph did nothing alone. God's hand was always leading, supporting, and encouraging him.

God does the same for you. He speaks to you in His Word to lead you. His Supper supports you through the forgiveness of your sins. He is present in His Church – your brothers and sisters in Christ – to encourage you. You are never serving alone.

Whenever God calls you to serve – to put your faith into action - no matter how challenging or difficult it may be, remember God calling Joseph to do the same. Remember the words of the angel to Joseph, "Don't be afraid to...." The Savior is in your life and forgives you. His Spirit leads you, supports you, and strengthens you. Believe, then do. Faith and action together – always. Amen.