

Isaiah 7:10-17

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Have you ever really considered that in choosing Mary, God also chose Joseph? I'm pretty sure that God knew that Mary was betrothed. Don't you? So yes, God chose Mary. And God also chose Joseph. Joseph, no less than Mary, is essential to this story, is essential to this fully human child that Joseph names Jesus. In the naming of Jesus, Joseph adopts him. In all ways – legally, culturally, and according to religious tradition – Joseph is the father of Jesus. According to ancient custom, this legal paternity by adoption is sufficient to confer all hereditary rights. Thus Jesus is a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is a son of the House of David. Jesus is inheritor of the rights of the messianic line of descent.¹

Joseph is Jesus' **legal** father. But some church fathers were reluctant to refer to Joseph as 'true' father. Origen, a bishop of the ancient church, calls Joseph a 'foster-father.'² However, in the early 5th century of the Common Era, Augustine claims and defends Joseph's true fatherhood of Jesus. Augustine proposes three levels of fatherhood. The first and lowest is the begetting of children outside of marriage. The second is the begetting of children within lawful marriage. And the third, and highest sort of fatherhood, is the fatherhood of adoption. Augustine refers to this as "begetting chastely in the heart whom they cannot beget in the flesh."³ This highest, spiritual fatherhood of adoption is what Augustine attributes to Joseph. Augustine argues that Joseph is a true father to Jesus and that spiritual begetting is far superior to physical begetting.

Now we can understand that Joseph is not simply a legal father. Joseph is a true father. And thus Jesus is a true son. We believe that Jesus, through the incarnation, is fully human. This fully human child grew up with a fully human father. There is no canonical record of Jesus' earliest childhood. But I can imagine that Jesus first called out to Joseph as 'abba,' father.

"Abba, come and see!" "Abba, show me how to work the lathe." "Abba, let me hold the lamp." "I love you, too, Abba."

¹ The New Jerusalem Bible (1985), Matthew 1, notes

² St. Joseph in Early Christianity, J.T. Lienhard (1999), p. 24.

³ *ibid.*, p. 25.

So what kind of man was this father, Joseph? What kind of man did God chose to be father of the messiah?

We actually know very little about Joseph. Just as the biblical record is mute on Jesus' earliest childhood, the biblical record holds few references to Joseph. The Gospel of Matthew contains the most references to Joseph.⁴ Biblical scholars assume that Joseph was an older man, perhaps a widower. We do not know if Joseph had children from a previous marriage. But the possibility may explain the reference to Jesus' brothers and sisters. Or it may not. We understand that Joseph was a carpenter from references in Matthew (13.55). And since Joseph is missing from the Gospel record of Jesus' public ministry, scholars assume that Joseph had died. Scholars say that this explains the account at the crucifixion of Jesus giving Mary into the care of the 'disciple whom [Jesus] loved' (John 19.26-27). We know a few facts from the gospel record – but not many.

We are still left with this question: what kind of man was Joseph?

The gospel today says that Joseph was a righteous man.

Joseph was a descendent of the House of David.

Joseph was thoughtful . . . and he was compassionate.

Joseph was attentive to the still, small voice of God . . . and Joseph responded with obedience.

All this we can glean from the gospel lesson. And more subtleties can be teased out of the Greek text. Much is often lost in the translation from the original biblical language to our English. Much is often lost, too, when we do not understand the underlying context of the time and culture in which the story takes place.

We read that Mary and Joseph are 'engaged.' We might better understand that Mary and Joseph were 'betrothed.' Betrothal indicates a relationship between a man and a woman that was contractual and entered into before witnesses. A betrothal could only be broken by a formal

⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, *St. Joseph's Day Lecture at St. Joseph's University* (1997), p. 10.

process of divorce.⁵ Not exactly a matter of giving back a ring and calling the caterer and the photographer to cancel... No, in being betrothed to one another, Mary and Joseph were as good as married. And for a woman to be found to be pregnant outside the betrothal meant that she had committed adultery. The punishment for adultery in that time was stoning – to the death.

In keeping with the custom of betrothal, Joseph has every right to divorce Mary – legally, culturally, and religiously. In doing so, Mary would be disgraced and she could be put to death. Not only Mary, but the child she was carrying. I imagine that a man like Joseph, an older man living through the Roman occupation of Israel, has seen enough of death. Mary's situation – according to society - was shameful. Was Joseph to bear the shame of Mary? What was he to do?

In our text, from one breath to the next, we move from shame to righteousness. We read in verse 19 that Joseph, *being a righteous man*, was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. Joseph “planned to dismiss her quietly.” He turned his will to the situation at hand and came to a decision that seemed congruent with his faith – his righteousness. And the decision Joseph made was to dismiss Mary – quietly. . . privately . . . secretly. Joseph intended in all ways possible to protect Mary from disgrace and death. We might picture a man who is perplexed by this unexpected turn of events and also concerned about this young girl. For what Joseph found out about her is not what he would have expected of her. Perhaps in his righteousness he felt pity for her.

I imagine Joseph sitting at a table – a table built with his own hands –while the evening sky turns to darkness. Joseph sitting at his table within a circle of light cast by a single oil lamp as the darkness gathers. His decision made; he retires to his bed. Can you imagine him lying there, perhaps still unsure or uneasy? The words in the Greek text imply that Joseph is still pondering his situation. Can we imagine Joseph - lying in bed in that time where we drift from waking to sleeping, still pondering what he is to do about Mary. What is a good and righteous man to do?

And in that time when we drift to sleep, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream.

⁵ The New Linguistic & Exegetical Key to the Greek NT – The Gospel of Matthew, Rogers & Rogers (1998), p. 1.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

There is no gospel record of a response to the angel by Joseph – either in dream or in waking. There are no arguments, no buts, no dithering.

In the face of all considerations that gave him the right to divorce Mary, Joseph instead – without hesitation – does as the angel commanded him and took her as his wife. And when she had borne a son, Joseph named in Jesus. Claiming him as his son and heir of the House of David. This is remarkable.

I wonder, how often in our lives are we attentive to the voice of God that calls us to action – even action that flies in the face of logic and common sense? Can we, like Joseph, in the midst of an unexpected turn of events, be attentive to and obedient to God’s command?

In being obedient to God by taking Mary as his wife, Joseph saves Mary and Jesus both. Joseph is protector of both. Joseph’s obedience is transformed into a radical and true fatherhood of Jesus. Joseph is protector of the one who will become – who is – the Messiah.

Joseph’s obedience shows us the power of God to use us – us! – in ways that save others.

What God does with Joseph is unexpected. God breaks into Joseph’s life and demands that he do something that is outside all the norms. God breaks all the rules. God colors outside all the neat line.

Are we ready for God to break into our lives? Are we attentive to God’s call – whether in a dream, or in the voice of another, or in the tugging in our hearts. We – like Joseph – have the potential to be faithful and obedient to God in ways that lead to redemption. Are attentiveness to God in our lives makes this possible. Our willingness to listen and obey makes us instruments of God’s radical in-breaking into the world.

The Advent message is to be attentive. Look for God breaking in to the world.

We are days away from Christmas now. In these final days before the coming of the Christ child, remember not just Mary and Jesus. Be sure to remember Joseph. Look, he is there – in the window. Righteous and obedient and loving. He is there, protecting Mary and his son, Jesus. There is a picture of God's radical in-breaking.

In these final days before Christmas, remember Joseph. He said "yes" to God as readily as did Mary. God broke in to do something new, and Joseph responded with faith and obedience.

In this time before the joy of Christmas day, remember Joseph and listen for the voice of God. Listen for God's voice breaking in. Listen for the possibility of the unexpected. Listen so that you, like Joseph, with faith and obedience will say: "Yes!"