

Saying Yes to Immanuel

Today, we move into the final week of Advent. Our time of waiting draws to a close as we begin to contemplate what it means for Jesus, the living Word of God, not just to be coming toward us, but to *arrive*. And who better to guide us than Joseph, the man chosen by God to be Jesus's father on Earth?

One thing we know about Joseph is that he had a distinguished pedigree. Matthew's Gospel recites Joseph's genealogy from Abraham through David and Solomon, forty-two generations culminating with "the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." It had long been prophesied that the Messiah would be born of the House of David. Matthew uses Joseph's regal heritage to prove that Jesus really was the Messianic Son of David and Abraham whose coming Isaiah and the other prophets had foretold.

If bloodlines were the only qualification for Messiahship, though, Jesus's claim might be in doubt. The Gospels tell us that Joseph wasn't Jesus's biological father. When we meet him, Joseph is facing a dilemma. His fiancée, Mary, appears to have gotten pregnant as women normally do, but Joseph knows he's not the father. Hebrew law would have forced Joseph to break their engagement. That he decided to it quietly tells us that Joseph was kind and forbearing, willing put his own pain aside to protect Mary from public scorn. That Joseph took the advice of an angel in a dream, went ahead with the wedding and claimed Jesus as his own suggests still more. Perhaps Joseph was especially pious, obedient to God's wishes regardless of his personal feelings. Perhaps Joseph was scholarly enough to remember this morning's passage from Isaiah, recognize the name Immanuel and proudly agree to be the future Messiah's father. Perhaps Joseph and Mary were a love match, and Joseph eagerly seized on any excuse to marry

his beloved despite legal prohibitions. Matthew tells us that Joseph was righteous; I think we can legitimately imagine him to have been devoted and steadfast as well.

Modern Bible scholars think that Joseph was a craftsman of some sort, most likely a stonemason since he worked in a region where wood was expensive and scarce. But Matthew and Mark tell us that Joseph was a carpenter. That tradition persists so strongly that some people bury statues of Joseph in their yards when they want to sell their homes. Please don't. Father Donald Calloway, author of *Consecration to St. Joseph: The Wonders of Our Spiritual Father*, insists that burying Joseph in your yard is less effective than prayer. It's also downright rude, especially if you bury him upside down until the house sells. Any saint worthy of his own feast day – we Episcopalians honor Joseph on March 19th – deserves more respect.

Bible scholars praise Joseph for his unquestioning obedience to God's will. They're right, but something else caught my attention while I was preparing this sermon. In Scripture, God normally uses prophets to deliver his messages. He only sends angels on really special occasions. There's nothing more special than the birth of the Messiah, so it makes sense that God would have sent angels to the baby's prospective parents. But the angel or angels who spoke to Mary and Joseph don't greet them the way angels normally do when they appear to frightened mortals. Speaking to Our Lady, Gabriel skips right over "Fear not!" and goes straight to "Hail, Mary!" Joseph's angel tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, but never even hints that Joseph might be afraid of his celestial messenger, or of anything else for that matter. That's amazing, when you think about it. The prophet Daniel, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, and the shepherds in the fields were terrified when angels popped in to chat with them. Mary and Joseph must have had the courage of lions. That was good, because they were going to need it.

Joseph apparently believed the angel, because he woke up and took Mary as his wife. That means he knowingly accepted not only Mary, but the baby she would soon bring into the world. Can you imagine taking responsibility for something so momentous? Jesus was a child like no other, conceived by the Holy Spirit and destined to save his people, even if his parents didn't yet know that he would save the whole world. Every time Jesus caught a cold, skinned his knee, or went missing in Jerusalem until he turned up in the Temple three days later, Mary and Joseph must have been frantic. Parents worry about their kids – it's an inescapable part of the job. But raising a little boy who also happened to be the hope of the entire human race would generate anxiety on an unprecedented level. Even if he didn't fully appreciate what he was getting into, Joseph displayed extraordinary courage when he agreed to take that on.

Just as today's Gospel passage tells us something important about Joseph, it tells us something important about God. Although Matthew says that Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him," the angel didn't actually issue any commands at all. The angel told Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, but didn't say Joseph had to marry her. God's preferences in the matter were clear, and Joseph still had a choice. He could have thanked the angel for his trouble and broken off the engagement nonetheless. Instead, Joseph chose to say yes to God. He welcomed a child whose name literally meant "God is with us." And by adopting Mary's son as his own, Joseph brought Jesus into the House of David, just as the prophets had predicted.

Today, in this last week of Advent, we await Emmanuel's imminent return. We have only a few more days until we celebrate his arrival with all the traditional trimmings: carols and stories, lights and cards, presents and feasting. Many of us have already attended holiday parties

and tuned our car radios to Christmas music. It's a time to rejoice. But before we all get distracted by our celebrations, there's something important to consider.

All good things come from God. Everything we have is a divine gift, especially the loving presence of Emmanuel, the God who is with us. We may not witness Jesus in the flesh right this minute, but his presence can be seen in every beautiful thing, heard in every joyful sound, and felt in every blessing we receive, large and small. Jesus doesn't just give and give and give, though. When God comes to dwell among us, he brings certain preferences with him. Just as God desired a gift from Joseph, I believe he desires gifts from each of us, and he hopes we'll choose to say yes when he asks for them.

Each of us is unique, and we all have different gifts to offer up to our God. Most won't be as scary as agreeing to protect the Messiah until he grows up enough to fulfill his saving mission. Speaking from personal experience, however, I can tell you that the gifts God really wants from us aren't what we might expect. They force us to be brave, and to grow in ways we would never imagine. In today's epistle, Paul writes that he, the enemy and persecutor of the early church, was called to be an apostle. Joseph, the humble craftsman, was called to be the father and guardian of the Christ. God calls us, too, if we have ears to hear and hearts to answer.

So in these last, hectic days before Christmas, set aside time for prayer and contemplation when you can. Be still and listen for the voice of an angel, gently asking you on God's behalf for something that only you can give. No one will force you – whatever else God might desire, he wants our freely-given love most of all. But you may discover there's a gift that God very much hopes you'll bring to the child in the manger. My prayer for you is that, this Christmas, you'll courageously choose to say yes and give your very best to Emmanuel, the God who is always, always with us. *Amen.*