

Advent IV (RCL/A): "Jesus and Joseph"

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

December 18, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

So: did an angel appear to Mary or Joseph?

And the answer is: "Yes" ☺. Take your pick. In Matthew's Gospel, which we heard today, the angel appears to Joseph. In Luke's Gospel the angel appears to Mary. The heart of the angel's message is the same, though: God's Child will be born as a human being, and the human mother is a virgin. **That's** surprising. But what's even **more** surprising is that this Child, born to a peasant couple in the backwater of Galilee, is King David's heir, will sit on David's throne – forever. The Child's birth will be the fulfillment of a thousand year's worth of hopes. Wait for it, though: there's more. His name will be **Jesus**. Because He'll save His people from their sins! **Jesus** means the One who saves us.

There is power in the name of **Jesus**, the name the angel commanded Joseph (and Mary) to call the Child: **Jesus** [bowing my head]. I learned as a child to bow my head when I said the Lord's name. If His name came up really often in a prayer, we were like a set of bobble-head dolls in our parochial school classroom! I think it's a lovely faith practice, and I still bow my head, maybe imperceptibly.... Though I've gotta admit, I was confused and thrown a bit off-balance when I first learned that some people are called "Jesús." (People are called Emmanuel, too, but that really doesn't create the same dilemma ☺.) I had to get to the point of saying, if a **person** is named Jesús, I'm not going to bow my head.

Jesus' name is **so** special that St. Paul wrote:

At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Philippians 2:10-11)

But **why**? What makes **Jesus** so special? Well, here's an everyday way to say how Paul explained it in his letter to the Philippians:

*6-8 He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, **obedient** life and then died a selfless, **obedient** death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.*

*9-11 Because of that **obedience**, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

That word “obedience” is one we don't fling around a lot. We teach our children to be obedient so that they won't run out in traffic, end up in detention or run afoul of the law. We take our puppies to obedience class so they'll learn to heel, sit, stay. We don't so much think of **adults** as obedient, though, do we? We rail against taking orders; we like to trim our own sails and direct our own lives. We Americans are proud of being **self**-determining. But today's Gospel definitely highlights **Joseph's** obedience.

You men and dads out there know that when a woman is pregnant, the limelight is going to be on her, not on you, the baby's father. Maybe that's accepted because it's just-to-be-expected, but maybe sometimes it's like a little pebble in your shoe. So imagine Joseph, who isn't **even** the Baby's father! Second billing to the Blessed Virgin pretty much means you're in the wings or backstage rather than on-stage. (Even having an angel visit you in your dreams seems kinda second-rate to having a day-time, real-time encounter like Mary had with Gabriel.) But it doesn't matter to Joseph. It's not just that he does what he's told. He does it devotedly, wholeheartedly, trustingly, without resentment or regret, content to play his unique, essential, though somewhat hidden role in the Greatest Story Ever Told.

Statues of Joseph often show him either with a saw in his hands or the Baby Jesus in his arms. ‘Seems like he’s always dressed drably in brown. Sometimes he’s holding a lily, signifying purity – because of the belief our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have that Mary remained a virgin, so Joseph must have, too. (We Lutherans interpret Scripture to say that Jesus had younger brothers and sisters, so that’s a point on which we agree to disagree ☺.) These days, most folks who think of Joseph at all probably associate him with real estate and the sale of homes. Most statues of Joseph today probably end up buried in the yard, along with a prayer that the house will sell. It’s not an approved practice of the Roman Catholic Church, but it’s a widespread custom anyway. (I understand part of the deal is that you must remember to dig him up and take him along when the move occurs!)

Once people become plaster-of-Paris “saints,” and literal statues are produced, we tend to view them in 2 dimensions rather than 3. They become part of a religious pantheon of beings who have little to do with our own lives and even less power to inform and shape our own faith. Let’s **not** let that happen with Joseph.

Max Lucado is a best-selling spiritual author whom Ruth Walsh especially loved. Years ago we richly discussed his book, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God*. The very first chapter is about Joseph. Lucado humanizes him by asking some questions of him, like:

- “Did you and Jesus arm wrestle? Did he ever let you win?”
- “Did you ever look up from your prayers and see Jesus listening?”³

Lucado also reminds us that Joseph was in agony after he found out his fiancée Mary was pregnant. He didn’t want to shame her, but he couldn’t see clear to marry her either, since she had apparently broken the law by being unfaithful to him. Matthew describes Joseph as

a *righteous* man. He didn't just mean that Joseph took his faith seriously, or that he was a rule follower. He also meant that Joseph, like Mary, was full of grace. He acted out of love as well as out of obedience.

But Lucado emphasizes it couldn't have been easy for Joseph to swallow the angel's message. A part of him must have screamed, "This is ridiculous! What do you mean the **Holy Spirit** planted the baby??" It's his version of Mary's question to Gabriel in Luke's Gospel: "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" (Luke 1:34) Lucado points out there are times in our lives, too, when we are "[c]aught between what God says and what makes sense."¹ He continues, "If you are asking what Joseph asked ["Are you kidding??"], let me urge you to do what Joseph did. Obey... He didn't let his confusion disrupt his obedience... Because Joseph obeyed, God used him to change the world. Can he do the same with you?"²

Amen.

¹Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 6.

²Ibid, p. 7.

³Ibid, p.3

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