

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, December 23, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“JESUS’ EARTHLY FATHER”

Matthew 1: 18-25

Humour columnist Dave Barry writes about Christmas pageants he took part in as a boy in his church. He says that the best role was being a shepherd and second best was that of a wise man. The least desirable part, however, was that of Joseph, because, he writes, “... Joseph had to hang around with Mary who was played by a girl. You had to wait backstage with this girl and walk in with this girl. Needless to say, you felt like a total wonk, which was not helped by the fact that the shepherds and wise men were constantly suggesting that you really liked this girl. So during the pageant Joseph tended to maintain the maximum allowable distance from Mary, as though she were carrying some kind of fatal disease.”

Dave Barry’s right. It wouldn’t be much fun to play Joseph. He doesn’t say a word. He just stands there while everyone gazes upon Mary and the baby. But he is vitally important to the story of Jesus’ birth and his life. So today we let the spotlight fall upon Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Matthew writes, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.”(Matthew 1:18)

Today we tend to undervalue fatherhood. Many men father a child, but never become real fathers to the child. Many children have no experience of godly fathers. These are days to uphold and encourage responsible and kindly fatherhood, especially in light of some of the recent tragic events, one right here in our own city, involving fathers and their children. .

God knows the value of a good father to a child. And I believe God quite deliberately chose Joseph to be Jesus’ earthly father. Joseph was not Jesus’ physical father, but he was the kind of father God wanted Jesus to have. I believe there are two main reasons that God chose Joseph to be Jesus’ earthly Father.

First, God chose Joseph to be Jesus’ earthly father, so that we could know God as our Heavenly Father.

That’s a big statement, I know, but never forget that Jesus lived a fully human life, meaning that he was shaped by all the influences around him, including family life. As Jesus grew up he saw Joseph at work and joined him at the carpenter’s bench. And later Jesus

taught us to call God, “Abba, “Father,” which is found throughout his teaching. “Do not be anxious,” said Jesus, “your Heavenly Father knows what you need”; again, “What father, whose son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?” Well, not Joseph and not the Heavenly Father. Now you say, this truth about God was revealed to God the Son by God the Father in the special relationship they had. Well, yes, but the truth was surely reinforced by the earthly fatherhood Jesus saw in Joseph and experienced through him.

Now Joseph was not perfect. Jesus came to save us from our sins, from being separated from God in time and eternity. And all of us, you, me, Mary, Joseph, need Jesus’ saving work. We all need to be changed from sons and daughters of Adam and Eve into sons and daughters of God. And that’s what Jesus came to do for us. But you don’t need to be perfect to reflect something of God’s image. I am sometimes guilty of this as a preacher, harping on peoples’ sins without speaking about the good that is in us and the good we do.. And so even Joseph’s imperfect character reflected something of God’s Fatherhood. It was the kind of fatherhood God wanted Jesus to see and experience. God chose Joseph as Jesus’ earthly Father, so that we could know God as our Heavenly Father. And this name is a blessing for us all, especially perhaps for those whose experience of earthly fatherhood is less than satisfactory. God is a loving, caring Father for us all.

The second reason God chose Joseph as Jesus’ earthly Father was to help form Jesus’ own character and mission. Matthew tells us three key factors about Joseph’s character.

First, that Joseph was a righteous man. Verse 18, “When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.”

A man named Tim Casey says that there is a different excitement level between the announcement of a couple’s first pregnancy and each subsequent pregnancy. For their first child, Casey’s wife jubilantly announced, “Tim! We’re pregnant! Hello Daddy.” For the second pregnancy, his wife placed a pair of pink baby booties across his chest while he was napping. For the third, Tim’s wife casually said one day, “I think it’s time we look at minivans.” And that’s how Tim knew she was going to have a baby.

How do you think Mary broke the news to Joseph of her pregnancy? How do you think Joseph reacted to the news? Joseph was a righteous man. This baby of Mary’s couldn’t be his! Mary must have been involved with another man. Mary’s story of the angel’s visitation and her pregnancy by the power of the Holy Spirit was totally incredible. Imagine the arrow that must have pierced Joseph’s heart. Imagine the sense of betrayal he must have felt. Joseph may have still loved Mary, but as a righteous man he had to do what God’s law said you must do. He must divorce Mary.

Now the desire to do the right thing marked Joseph's life, not only in this situation, but in the Nazareth home and carpenter shop. No one was cheated by Joseph. No second-rate work knowingly came out of his shop. The Jewish festivals were observed in Joseph and Mary's home. Luke tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath as his custom was. And where do you think he first saw that custom observed. Joseph's desire to do the right thing must have rubbed off on Jesus. For like his earthly father Joseph, Jesus was a righteous man. In fact, Jesus was the only truly righteous person, ever, the only one who perfectly followed his Heavenly Father's will and obeyed his word. "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them," Jesus said. To do what was right in God's sight was a hallmark of Jesus' life. And this desire must have taken hold of him as he observed good and righteous Joseph, the earthly father God had chosen for him.

Next Matthew tells us that Joseph was a merciful man. "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." (V. 19) The law allowed two options if an engaged woman became involved with another man. She could be brought before a public court for judgement and possible stoning to death, or she could be divorced quietly by handing her a written notice. Joseph must have been terribly hurt by what had happened, but he chose the second option. He balanced justice with mercy. Knowing that he was a sinner himself, Joseph knew his own need for mercy. Those who know their need for God's mercy tend to be merciful towards others. Jesus himself was without sin, but the desire to balance the letter of the law with mercy was always in his' ministry. No doubt Jesus developed it from seeing and hearing how Joseph lived. Perhaps Joseph told him how he dealt with the news of Mary's pregnancy.

Now Jesus never overlooked sin or underestimated its severity, for sin is an offense to our holy and loving God and ruins relationships. But Jesus exposed sin with the purpose of forgiving it and setting things right. To a woman caught in adultery he said, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more." On the Cross Jesus reconciled God's righteousness and God's mercy. In his death Christ took our sins upon himself, so that all who believe in God's Risen Son receive the mercy and forgiveness of God which brings us to eternal life.

You know, there are some self-righteous Christians use God's word as a club to pummel people and make them feel small. But there's another way. It means using Scripture gently to open people to another possibility, to guide them to God's way. The word of God is a lamp to those in darkness, not a weapon to bully people into submission or into agreement with your particular point of view. In Joseph we see a balance of righteousness and mercy, and we see it in Jesus, too. It is a good balance for us to seek.

Matthew also tells us that Joseph was a trusting man. Before he could divorce Mary, an angel appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David...take Mary as your wife,

for the child... is from the Holy Spirit.” (V. 20) Joseph did as the angel commanded him, he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus. (V. 24)

Joseph trusted God enough to have his mind and his action changed by God. This is a good test for us. We often say we trust God and believe his word, but do we trust God enough to have our mind and our action changed by God’s word? Do we trust God enough to rely on his word rather than on our own understanding or our human inclination? Scripture tells us, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5) And that’s what Joseph did. He must have known that obeying God rather than his own desire would set tongues wagging, and there is a hint in the gospels that Jesus’ unusual birth stuck with the family for a long time. People even called Jesus illegitimate. But Joseph trusted God and was willing to bear the shame this course of action would bring.

And this is how it was for Jesus, trusting the will of His Heavenly Father, agonizing over it sometimes, but finally doing it all the way to the Cross, bearing its shame for our salvation. And surely his determination to obey God’s will was shaped and influenced by Joseph’s willingness to step out in faith, even when it was difficult, even when humanly speaking it didn’t make sense.

It was no accident. God deliberately chose Joseph as His Son’s earthly father for two reasons - to help shape Jesus’ character and mission, and so we could know God as our own Heavenly Father.

Author Dennis Covington recalls that on summer evenings when he and his friends had been fishing or playing ball, each boy’s mother called him home a different way. Most would stand at the back door and yell for her child. “Frankie! Danny! Stanley! Come home!” Some mothers had big cowbells outside the back door that they would ring to call their child home. But Dennis’ *dad* was always the one to call him home. And he didn’t just stand on the porch and yell for Dennis. He wandered down to the lake and softly called, “Dennis.” And father and son would walk home together. Covington writes, “he always came to the place I was before he called my name.”

That’s what God did for us. In Jesus, He came to where we were before he called us. God came in Jesus so we can know God as our Heavenly Father. He came in Jesus to save us from our sins. He came in Jesus for you, and for me. Today let us put all our faith and trust in God our Heavenly father, and in his only begotten Son Jesus Christ, the one raised on earth by Mary, and yes, by Joseph, too.

