

Day Twenty-two

Scripture:

Matthew 1:18-25

Reflection:

In the theater, the most important dramatic action occurs downstage. That is the area of the stage closest to the audience. It is here the lighting is brightest. Of course, it is not the only portion used. Characters move through many other areas of the stage. Snippets of dialogue might occur in the back corners. But, by and large, downstage is where the action is. Downstage is where the lead characters are found and the most significant lines are spoken.

Joseph is not the star of the Christmas story. Only Matthew gives him any real attention and, even then, Joseph is never given any spoken lines. In fact, Joseph has no lines in the entire story. Even when returning to the temple when Jesus is twelve, it is Mary, not Joseph, who scolds her son for causing His parents such an anxious search. By the time Jesus emerges as an adult to be baptized by John, Joseph is never mentioned again. We are left with no information about when or how he seems to have died.

In a story where angels and shepherds and wicked King Herod and magi and Zachariah and Elizabeth and, of course, Mary all get lots of lines, Joseph gets none. Not a word. He is undeniably not a lead character in the drama. He is never on center stage.

There is a special place in the Kingdom of God for those assigned to serve in the shadows and back corners. They dutifully fulfill their parts, knowing they will never get top billing. They are not the stars of the Bible's story. Barnabas is one of them. As is Titus, along with Thaddeus. So is Phoebe and the Syrophoenician woman who begged Jesus to free her daughter from the power of a demon. They pass through the story of redemption as bit players with small supporting roles. They move the story forward, without ever coming downstage and standing the bright lights as a major character.

This does not mean they are unimportant. Where would Elijah have been without the food given by the widow of Zarephath? Where would Paul have been without Silas? And, how could God have sent Jesus into the world without Joseph? Joseph will be given not only the task of protecting Mary but with loving and raising a son that is not his son. None of Joseph's blood runs in Jesus' veins. His wisdom as a teacher, his skill as a craftsman, the instruction in Torah and devotion expected of any husband and father will undoubtedly be valuable in the life of the young Messiah.

How rare is such a man? None of us can really say. But, it seems likely such a man is rare, indeed. To be so central to the story and yet so obscure in the script must require someone who combines both great courage and great humility. Like I said, we cannot know. But, it is at least worth a momentary pause to consider this: Was God only waiting to find such a remarkable young woman as Mary? Or, was he waiting even longer to find a woman like Mary engaged to such an extraordinary man as Joseph?

Family:

Materials: A nativity scene that you set up in advance. A wooden one works best for the point of the lesson, but you can make the point with any kind (see below). Put Mary and baby Jesus in the center, along with the adoring shepherds. You can even include the Wise Men (although Bible students will point out they came much later when Mary and Joseph had found a house). Put in the angels and the animals, too. Just leave out the figure of Joseph and put him out of sight for now.

Christmas is only three days away!

(Go through the figures one by one. Point to each one and ask questions like, "And who is this?" and "What are they doing in Bethlehem?" After you have gone through all the figures say, "Well, that's it. I think we're ready for Christmas." If one of the children has noticed Joseph is missing, wonderful. Use that to bring him out of hiding and put him into the nativity. If no one noticed, then say something like, "Wait just a minute." (look hard and pretend to count the figures) "Someone is not here. I just know there ought to be one more person in Bethlehem. Who can that be?"

It's Joseph! Of course. (put his figure in) Today in the Jesse Tree we come to the story of Joseph. This is not the Joseph who is sold in the slavery back in the Old Testament. This is the Joseph of the Christmas story.

The Bible does not tell us much about Joseph. We do not know about his mom and dad. We do not know how he learned to be a carpenter. Joseph is just kind of quiet. He's like a strong and wise father who watches over his young wife and her little baby, but does not ever say very much.

Some people like to talk. Some people even like to talk up on a stage or in church. They might be teachers or preachers or actors in a play. They stand up and talk with big loud voices so we can all hear them.

But, you know, some people do not talk much. They do not like to stand up front and talk in front of people. Can you think of anybody like that?

Sometimes people who do not like to talk enjoy building things with their hands. Maybe they like to cook and make cookies or homemade bread. Or, maybe they like to work with saws and hammers and wood. They build things.

The Jesse Tree ornament for today is about Joseph. And see what it is. These are tools. They help us think of Joseph because he was a carpenter. He worked with wood and made things. And you know what, God picked big strong quiet Joseph to help take care of Jesus when he was just a baby and to help him grow up.

When a grownup shows you how to cook something or how to build something or how to make something, think about Joseph. He did things just like that for Jesus.

Prayer:

In your prayer, thank God for the quiet strength of Joseph. He had the courage to take Mary to be his wife, in spite of the fact she was going to have a baby. He was strong enough to bring Mary on a long journey from Nazareth all the way down to Bethlehem. He was resourceful enough to help make a stable someplace they could stay. And, he was wise enough to listen to the warning God sent him in a

dream and to take Mary and the baby all the way down to Egypt to keep them safe from wicked King Herod.

Think of some of the quiet people that have blessed you. Not the people who were teachers or sponsors or preachers. Think about some of the people who did not help you by what they said, but by what they did.

Ask God to help everyone in your family, quiet people and people who like to talk, to make Jesus this center of their Christmas this year.