

“A Quiet Man”

Nelson Mandela said that, “You will achieve more in this world through acts of mercy than you will through acts of retribution.” Well, that’s Joseph all over. Joseph was a perfect example of someone whose actions not only speak louder than any words, but he achieved so much more through mercy to Mary than if he had chosen the retribution that was his lawful right.

It’s safe to say that Joseph was a quiet man...He never said a word that ever made it into print ...Joseph doesn’t speak a single word in the New Testament. He only gets a handful of mentions. We hear of Joseph for the last time when Jesus is 12. After that there is a referral to Joseph as Jesus father, and that’s it.

After a 100 or so years Christians began to develop traditions that were not really accurate. People want answers don’t they – even if they play a little loose with the facts...

The common tradition is that Joseph was an elderly widower, 93 years old when he married Mary – dying at the age of 111 when Jesus was 18. This supports the idea of Mary as perpetual virgin, taken in and cared for by a kindly old man and the marriage was never consummated. This also explains the mention of Jesus’ brothers and sisters later in the New Testament. This is mostly a catholic tradition as the Protestants generally hold that Joseph was probably the regular marrying age of young men in those days – 14 or 15.

We do know from Mark 6 that Joseph was a carpenter. The actual Greek word used here is *tekton* which can mean woodworker, craftsman, and even stone mason. He probably made doors and roof beams, repaired farm tools, and stuff like that. We get our word ‘architect’ from *tekton*. An *arch-tekton* is a master-builder, just like an arch-angel is a lead-angel. Joseph was not an *archtekton*, just a regular *tekton*, which I think lends to the younger Joseph theory. If he was in his 90’s wouldn’t he have made *archtekton* by then?

Think about men you know who work with their hands. Down to earth, “measure twice, cut once’ careful, detail oriented, and humble men of few words. Joseph may have been like that. He would have taught Jesus this trade as he was growing up.

In Luke we learn about Mary and Nazareth – in Matthew Nazareth isn’t even mentioned until well into chapter 2 when Jesus is probably 2 years old. Bethlehem is Joseph’s hometown. It’s where they had to go to register for the census. And if you’re wondering why – if Joseph had family in Bethlehem, like I did, why in the world did they have to stay in the stable? It has to do with the sketchy translation of the Greek word

for “inn,” – *kataluma* -- and I’ll talk more about that in a couple weeks when we talk about the census.

Mary’s hometown was Nazareth, Josephs was Bethlehem, and so it seems to have been a long distance relationship. Maybe those DO work out sometimes...

Next week we’ll talk about Mary visiting cousin Elizabeth in the village of Ein Karem, 4 miles outside of Bethlehem, which she seems to have done right after she found out she was pregnant. It would have been during this visit that she was able to see Joseph and talk to him about this new complication in their relationship. Joseph would probably have then traveled with Mary back to Nazareth where they would begin their life together until forced to head back to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is about 80 miles from Nazareth, and a bedroom community only 6 miles away from Jerusalem. A pretty good-sized town, with around 500 to 1000 people, it was home to shepherders, and laborers, as well as farmers - who grew wheat and barley for the bakers, who would deliver the bread to Jerusalem - hence the name Bethlehem, meaning, “House of Bread.”

Unlike Nazareth, Bethlehem was very well-known. It was the town where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. It’s the setting for the Book of Ruth. Ruth’s great grandson was a shepherd boy you’ve probably heard of – David, King of Israel, and slayer of the giant, Goliath. It became known as the “City of David” and as we heard in today’s Old Testament reading was prophesied to be the town from which a new king would come.

Growing up, Joseph and his friends would have been very aware of Bethlehem’s history and prophecies. I can see them reenacting the battles with the philistines - pretending to take down the giant. They would have grown up knowing that one day the messiah would come from right there in the middle of them. Once again God demonstrates a certain love toward the working class, the unpretentious; those who are humble in service.

So Joseph has just learned that his betrothed is pregnant and not by him. Remember this is a formally binding agreement, complete with ceremony – for all intents and purposes they were married and to break up they would have to get an official divorce. All that was left was the actual marriage ceremony, the consummation, and the move to Joseph’s home – usually about a year after the betrothal. We don’t much information from the short paragraph in Matthew, and there is a lot left unsaid.

The NIV says it this way: “Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” That sentence peaks volumes.

Knowing what we know about people – whatever age they live in – we can assume that Joseph didn't believe Mary about the whole 'child of God' thing. Would you? Why else would he have wanted a divorce? The only logical explanation was that Mary had been unfaithful.

Imagine the emotions Joseph must have been going through – betrayal, humiliation, dishonored of course – shamed. But then, as Mary told him her crazy story of the angel – imagine how angry he must have been. Joseph's whole world had been thrown into a tailspin by this. I wonder if he reminded Mary of the law in regard to adultery – death in the town square by public stoning. If they had met while Mary was visiting Elizabeth I can just see Joseph walking away from the house – heartbroken – while Mary stands at door crying bitter tears because she really IS telling the truth and the man she is to marry refuses to believe her.

Sometime during that 4-mile walk from Elizabeth's back to Bethlehem Joseph had time to think. I should 'a said this or I should 'a done that – you know how we do when we're upset. But get this: Mary's very life was now in Joseph's hands. Maybe it was during this long walk that he came up with his plan for a quiet divorce and to spare Mary's life.

It wouldn't take very long after he broke off the engagement for everyone to see that Mary was pregnant. The assumption would be that the child was Joseph's and that he slept with Mary before he was supposed to, and the shame would fall on him instead of Mary. Everyone would feel sorry for poor Mary, she gets to keep the dowry and Joseph would probably still have to provide for the child. Mary's family could even demand that Joseph still take Mary as his wife.

Joseph was a righteous man, indeed, but his righteousness didn't come from following the letter of the law which was very clear on these matters. Joseph's righteousness came from his mercy and compassion for Mary. Joseph's righteousness came from doing the right thing regardless of the law.

Have you notice how God takes our pain and disappointment and uses it in ways we couldn't imagine? When we are at our lowest points in life, finding ourselves on journeys that we never wanted to take, we would do well to think of Joseph, who put Mary's welfare before his own. Remember the words of the apostle Paul who wrote "...all things come together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28).

You know, just when everything is going all wrong, it's at that moment that God is doing some his best and most remarkable work. Of course most of the time we never get to see it or at least not until much later. Imagine if Joseph had walked away that day,

leaving Mary to be a single mom ... all the blessings he would've missed. What would our Gospel story have looked like then? Would we even be here? It's a great reminder not to walk away from difficulties and disappointments too quickly.

Joseph had his famous dream that night and in the morning he walked the 4 miles back to Mary. I imagine he apologized for not believing her, told her that, yes, he would still marry her, and raise the child as his own. It wouldn't be long after that that the two of them would travel back to Mary's hometown of Nazareth and they would begin to make arrangements for a wedding – and fast.

You see Joseph was a quiet man, But his actions are as loud and clear as can be. We can see Joseph's influence in Jesus' teaching. Jesus calls God Abba which is the Aramaic word for 'papa.' WE see the extravagant love of the father's mercy in the story of the prodigal when the son squanders his entire inheritance on fast living, at the same time being patient with the older jealous son. Could this be a reflection of Jesus' own father's influence? I wonder what else Jesus might have taken away from his relationship with Joseph...

Actions really do speak louder than words as evidenced in the story of Joseph and Mary. How can we be more like Joseph? Can we stop jumping to conclusions? Can we try to remember that God really does have a plan that we might be too big for us to see? Maybe we too can sleep on it for a night when we're faced with calamity and disappointment.

I suppose the last thing I should mention is Matthew's editorial comment: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophets – a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call him Emanuel, which means, -- anyone? – God with us. It's from Isaiah and Isaiah was probably not prophesizing Jesus, but foretelling the birth of his own son, also named Immanuel. Isaiah's son was to be a reminder to the people of his time that God was with them, the same way that Jesus is the reminder for every generation since his birth that God is with us.

But with Jesus, as His followers, we are also called to be signs of Emmanuel. We are supposed to be signs of God's presence in the world. And this Christmas, as well as the rest of the year, we are the light in the darkness.

When I think of Joseph, even though he wasn't a Christian, I can't help but think of this quote from St Francis, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words."

Amen.