

This morning, we have a story about Joseph, the husband of Mary, the earthly father of Jesus. As it happens, I’ve been running into Joseph lately, so to speak.

The first time was in a hospital hallway. There were pictures on the wall, for display, for decoration, and for sale. Wouldn’t you know it, my favorite one was \$4500?

It was a picture of Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus in the stable. There were animals around. However, it wasn’t the usual picture in this setting, where everyone is standing or kneeling before the manger where Baby Jesus is.

No, this was a very realistic, natural picture. Mary was asleep, on her right side, with her head on a pile of hay. Sitting by her in the foreground is Joseph. I don’t believe I have ever seen a picture with Joseph sitting down, have you?

The Baby Jesus was lying in Joseph’s lap, wide awake. It was such a wonderful picture!

After all, who needs sleep more than a woman who has just given birth? And Joseph had to have picked up the baby sometimes!

In so many Nativity scenes, Joseph seems to be the strong, silent one in the background, protective of Mary and the Baby Jesus. That was necessary- they needed protection, and Joseph did a good job.

The other encounter I had with Joseph was by watching the movie “The Nativity Story” on TV. We showed it here one time on our screens.

In the movie, we get to see Joseph as he dreams and is informed by the angel:

“Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you Joseph, will name him Jesus—“God saves”—because he will save his people from their sins.” (The Message)

This was a real turning point for Joseph. Earlier on, when he had found out that Mary, his fiancée, was having a baby, he had been upset.

He knew it wasn’t his baby, and that that wasn’t possible. For that reason, he didn’t feel like going through with the marriage.

On the other hand, he didn’t want Mary hurt by gossip or spite, or worst of all, being stoned to death. In the movie, Joseph had been creaming about such a stoning.

So, Joseph had just made up his mind to set aside the betrothal and marriage, quietly, with as little fuss as possible.

The angel’s message made all the difference. According to a story by Jo-Ann Jennings, Mary’s mother had been worried sick.

“A noise at the door interrupted [her] thoughts, and she quickly raise her head and wiped her tears, fearful that her husband would find her crying.

‘Mother?’ Mary’s voice said, ‘I’m home.’

In spite of the doubts [she] held inside, she ran to the doorway to hold Mary in her arms. No words were spoken as they embrace, [her] tears falling again, mixing with Mary’s as their cheeks touched.

She looked at Mary sadly. ‘You have the look about you,’ she said. ‘Your face is fuller. Your hips are wider. Soon people will know.’

Mary nodded. ‘I’M not afraid,’ she whispered. ‘God will see us through this.’

As evening came on and the family sat down to eat, [she] jumped each time there was a noise outside, for fear the townspeople were coming in force to murder her only daughter—to convict her of adultery. She had seen women stoned before, and now she closed her eyes, trying not to remember the anger, hysteria, and mutilation.

[She] trembled when a knock came at the door. Her legs shivered. She pulled her clothing tightly around her, preparing for the worst. ‘Oh, God, oh, God,’ she whispered. ‘Save my good child from this.’

There were no angry shouts as the door opened, and Joseph stood there, humbly looking in at the family.

[She] sighed with relief, seeing only peace in his eyes.

‘I have come to take Mary home,’ he said. ‘It is time that our marriage began.’

Mary’s father continued to eat, nodding, and saying only, ‘Let it be done.’ “  
(Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Volume 9)

Joseph was an important figure in the story, an important person in Jesus’ life, in their family, in history, really.

Except for the first chapters in Matthew and Luke, he is not mentioned all that much. We get a bit more of a picture of Joseph when we read Luke’s narration of the prenatal journey which Mary and Joseph made to Bethlehem, to comply with the census.

We generally think of that trip as Mary riding sidesaddle on the donkey, and Joseph leading it, as we walked. Ninety miles on foot! Just to be counted and taxed!

That trip must have been so hard, on both people involved. Then when they reached Bethlehem, it was just “No vacancy, no vacancy, no vacancy” everywhere.

And Mary wasn’t just tired, she was going into labor! Nothing like riding a donkey over rough terrain to get that started.

Yet, somehow, Joseph found a stable for shelter, and the Baby Jesus was born there.

We tend to have our Nativity scenes set up like that—a stable, animals, Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, and the honored guests, the shepherds and kings. It’s a beautiful setting, a beautiful and holy moment. It’s almost like a happy ending.

Yet it wasn’t the ending at all—it was the beginning. It was the beginning of a family.

God had arranged all this. God’s Son, Jesus was born into a human family. You might say it was part of his training. Jesus learned human things, growth and development. He learned to get along with and obey a mother and father. Later he learned the value of brothers and sisters. He learned a trade, carpentry, from Joseph. He was brought up by a decent, good man, a man who believed in God, a man willing to take instruction from angels. (Later, the dream and angel thing happened again.)

Joseph is not the star of the show. His role is not flashy or celebrated. However he is so important. He is such a good example for us.

There are lots and lots of times that God has something that must be done, which requires, as they say, “support staff.” Joseph was part of God’s support crew. He served God well as a husband and as a father. Because of Joseph’s willingness to believe the angels, our Lord and Savior survived birth and infancy, despite difficult conditions and even enemies who would have killed him.

Because of Joseph, Jesus could grow up in a good, ordinary safe home, with parents who cared for and respected one another.

Perhaps that is how we need to consider our own lives. Perhaps by doing our best, being Christians and living accordingly, and always remembering to listen to God, we too can serve God in some wonderful plan, the way Joseph did.

And of course, we have an advantage over Joseph—we know all of Jesus' life and his death and his resurrection. We claim Jesus as our Lord, as our Savior, and we trust in him for our salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life.

So, here's to Joseph. Thank you! Thank you for stepping up and being the best adoptive father in all the world, ever!

Amen.

By Reverend Sally J. DeMasters