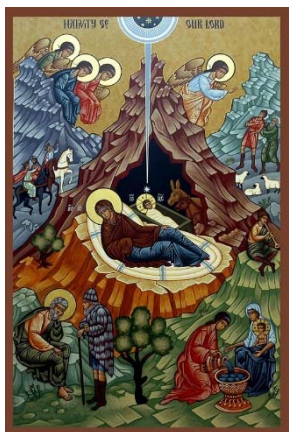


Quiet Strength *Matthew 1: 18-25*

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**December 9, AD 2018
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

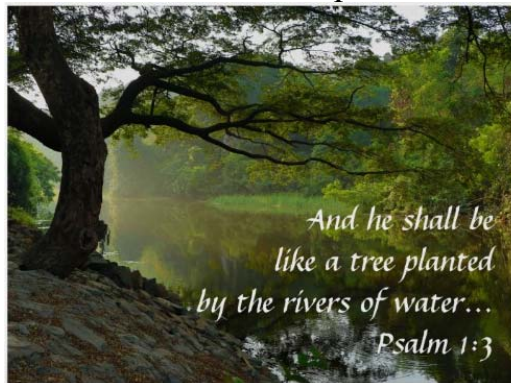


The very early images of the birth of Jesus are quite busy. This portrayal follows a pattern that has been around more than a thousand years. Rather than a stable, there is a cave where animals were sheltered. Jesus, of course, is in the center, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. The light of the Christmas star comes down from heaven, identifying him as the Son of God. Mary sleeps next to him, recovering from her labor as the animals look on. Above, the heavenly host appears to the shepherds in the countryside. The wise men are en route, following the light of the star. Down in the bottom left corner sits Joseph. He is outside of the shelter of the cave, sitting on a rock. He props his weary head on his hand. There is no joy at the safe arrival of his son. An old man stands and talks to him. In the tradition of these paintings, this old man is the Tempter. He raises the old doubts in Joseph about who is the father of Mary's child. And whether or not he will have love enough to embrace the boy. Whether he is up to the task of being a father and providing for a family. Joseph is pondering it all.

Later paintings would come to show more joy and adoration on Joseph's face. But I am intrigued that very early on in Christian art, the people who worship Jesus made a decision to show Joseph weary with thought. Virgin conceptions just do not happen. God has interrupted the way of the world. The eternal Spirit has taken up flesh. Could this have happened? Or am I just a fool to believe it? Joseph sits outside the cave at Christmas on behalf of us all. He is the man who had to wrestle with the enduring question, "Is this story really true?"

I believe Scripture gives us strong reason to believe that Joseph overcame these temptations and became a model of the courage required to put our faith in Jesus as the Savior and Lord. Joseph's story is a quiet one. I would venture to say that Joseph was more an introvert than an extravert. We have no record of any words from him. But we do have record of deliberate actions. Joseph was a craftsman, specifically a carpenter. That tells us a lot about him. He couldn't get his wood pre-cut from Home Depot. A carpenter had to cut his boards from the timber. He had to envision the project and see it all the way through from the raw logs to the finished home or furniture. A carpenter then had to be strong to wield tools. He had to be creative to imagine what the lumber could become. He had to be patient. Planing the wood. Sanding it. Measuring. Notching. Measuring more. Correcting mistakes. Assembling. Patient endurance was required. Both brute strength and subtle craft. Heft and artistry. Joseph's trade and his character were intertwined.

We also learn about him from one word that Matthew uses. He tells us that Joseph was a *just* man. That's the same word as *righteous*. It's the word that meant someone who lives out what God requires of us. Psalm 1 describes the righteous



man this way,

“His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in due season, and its leaf does not wither.” For the ancient Hebrews, working for a living with your hands and applying your mind to God's Word went together. Being practical and being Scriptural were natural partners. It was not just Bible scholars who knew the Word: manly men kept God's Word on their minds and lips as they worked their crafts. This kind of righteous person gets rooted in the wisdom of God. They stay watered in the Word and so drought and storm do not shake them. They yield fruit over time.

This past week our elders examined the new deacons and elders that you elected. It's a wonderful part of our Presbyterian process. I sat in on a group and listened as each new officer answered this question, “What devotional practices have you found most meaningful through the years?” One elder answered that

what mattered most was consistency. It didn't matter as much which Scripture guide he used or which prayer technique he found. What mattered was that every day he prayed and everyday he read Scripture. He said, "I find that when I pray, Scripture makes more sense. And the more I read Scripture, the better my prayers are. They work together." Exactly. That consistency is what makes a righteous man. It's also how we build in ahead of time the wisdom we need when a crisis comes. It's how we know to ask of God and to listen correctly to God when deep doubts arise. How do you weather the storms of life? Pray and meditate on Scripture when the weather is fine. Once the winds pick up, it may be too late.

Now Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married. This was a legally binding agreement. Once a man and a woman were betrothed, the man would prepare a place on the family land where he and his new bride would live and raise a family. When all was ready, the ceremony could proceed and the husband could take his wife back to their new home. In the eyes of the law, they were already married during this preparation. So when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, his life was in free fall. This would bring shame on the entire family. Technically, they needed to find the father so they could determine the full circumstances and thus the proper penalty, which could be as severe as death. But no father could be found. Joseph had grounds to break the engagement, which was tantamount to a divorce. He would send Mary away. Get her out of the community she had soiled and send her off to whatever relatives would take her.

It's fascinating to me that the word for sending her away was the same word used concerning the scapegoat. On the day of atonement, the high priest would lay his hands on the head of a goat, symbolically transferring the sins of the people to that goat. Then they would drive the goat off into the wilderness. The goat would carry away the shame of the people. If Joseph sent Mary away in disgrace, he could send away the shame on his family and village. Whatever happened to her next would be her fault, not his. We get a sense of Joseph's character when we read that his desire was to send her away quietly. He did not wish to disgrace her. He did not want to make this any more public than it had to be. He did not want a trial or a scene. He was more grieved than he was angry, more brokenhearted than outraged.

Joseph was a thoughtful man. Matthew tells us he pondered deeply all these things. He weighed carefully the options. And while he thought, he fell asleep.



And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel called him by name and by heritage, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife. For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” The angel confirmed the account that Mary had given. This conception was miraculous. The Holy Spirit created the life in her womb.

Joseph had no part in the conception of the child. But he would have a large and essential part in the life of this child. Joseph had to give the child a name. He could use a family name. Or he could use a name to express something about the child. There was even precedent for giving a child a disgraceful name to go with circumstances. The decision belonged to Joseph. It would determine the course of the baby’s life. The angel had some advice. “You are to call the child Jesus.” That name was a variation on the name Joshua. The name means “The LORD I Am saves.” *You are to call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.* This child who appears to be a disgrace is the savior. Give him that mighty name. Don’t send Mary away. Take her as your own. Name the child not out of shame, but name him savior.

It’s very interesting to pause here a moment. To sit with the decision Joseph had to make. Centuries earlier, the first Joseph was used mightily by God. That Joseph, the son of the patriarch Jacob, had also heard from God in dreams. But the young Joseph let his special knowledge go to his head. He got proud. And his older brothers got mad. They sold him as a slave to Egyptian traders. The first Joseph was carried away. He spent years in an Egyptian prison, after being falsely accused of a sexual scandal. He got out when the LORD gave him the interpretation of the Pharaoh’s dreams. Over time, Joseph grew to be the second most powerful person in Egypt. And he began to see that all the injustices done to him were part of a greater plan. His suffering and shame would result in salvation for many. For Joseph’s own brothers came down to Egypt in a famine seeking food. Joseph provided for the LORD’s special people. And in great maturity, when he could have

been nursing decades of anger, he said, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve life. God sent me before you to keep alive his people during the famine. So it was not you who sent me here, but God!” (Gen. 45: 5-8). The first Joseph understood that the disgrace and suffering he endured would bring life to many.

I wonder if Joseph the father of Jesus thought about the story of the guy he



was named after. The parallels are eerie. Joseph would have to embrace the humiliation of Mary’s pregnancy. To take her as his wife was to take the shame as his own and live out love, dignity, provision and constancy for years until the tongues finally stopped wagging. But he was given a preview. It is God who is sending you ahead. There is no sin of Mary sending you to this life of husband and father. It is God himself. God is sending you ahead, through the awkwardness, to raise a child whom you shall name Jesus. For he will save his people from their sins.

As we ponder all this with Joseph, Matthew reminds us of another Scripture. A prophecy in the book of Isaiah (7;14) which had long been a mystery. “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.” The impossible had happened. God has come to be with us. In Mary’s womb. And God was sending Joseph ahead of all of us. To be faithful. To be courageous. To be the carpenter who made a home for the savior of the world.

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he did not send away Mary, he took her to himself as his wife.

If there is any truth to the ancient reflections on the birth of Jesus, then this decision of faith that Joseph made was not just once. It was a continuing decision. And he had to exercise that courage every time the Tempter put doubt in his mind. Is this really God’s child? Can God really become man? Or are you a fool? Can

there be an incarnation, a coming of God in the flesh to be with us? Or are you, like your ancestor, just a big dreamer?

Again and again, he had to cling to the angel words, “Joseph, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For this child is of God.” Again and again, Joseph had to recall the stories of his namesake in the Scriptures. God lets suffering come to us. But he has a greater plan. If we persist in faith and faithfulness, we can say with both Josephs: You did not send me here. God did. God sent me ahead of you to save life.

Do not be afraid, dear ones, of whatever you are going through. God has not abandoned you. He has come to be with us in Jesus Christ. He has a greater plan and a higher purpose. Trust him. Entrust yourself to him. Sink your roots deep in the Scriptures. Offer your situations to him in prayer. Ask him to guide you. To show you how your faith and trust will lead many to life. He still leads us. He still uses even our pain, no, especially our pain, to work his salvation in the world. Do not be afraid. The Holy Spirit is at work.