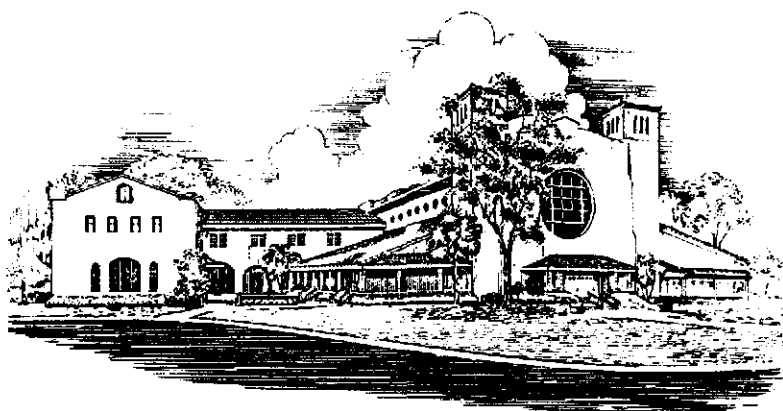


First Church Pulpit

"THE FORGOTTEN MAN OF CHRISTMAS (JOSEPH)"

Text: "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the
angel of the Lord commanded him..."

— *(Matthew 1:24)*



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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DECEMBER 20, 1987

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My friends, as we come near Christmas, I want to speak to you for a little while about Joseph, the father of our Lord, in a sermon I have entitled "The Forgotten Man of Christmas". Tradition in the Church and our pageants and carols all venerate the Wise Men, as they should. We admire and follow and watch the shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night, as we should. We become peeved and angry with the Innkeeper, who refused to give room to the holy couple, as maybe we should not...he was simply doing his work. We venerate Mary, as we should. We kneel before Jesus, as we must.

But Joseph...well, he is sort of just there, accompanying his young wife, who was great with child, to Bethlehem. But other than being an arm to lean upon, there really is not much of a role for Joseph in this play. Following the opening mention, as you look through the Bible, with one minor exception, he disappears. Having played an insignificant role to begin with, he is gone forever.

The forgotten man in the marriage...I have a feeling there are many of you within the sound of my voice here, and on our radio broadcast, who are chuckling a little...those of you who have lived in the shadow of a wife, or children. So many men have said in my study: "As long as I pay the bills, that is all they want from me!" For Joseph to be a forgotten

man strikes a familiar chord, because often in a home or marriage or community someone or another is forgotten or overlooked.

On the evening that Dr. Mervyn Dixon's daughter was married, he gave me a little card, which read: "I am the father of the bride. Nobody seems to pay much attention to me today. I am rather forgotten. But let me assure you that I am getting my full share of attention from the banks, from the businessmen, all of whom are watching me very carefully." Touché. At a more serious level, if you feel forgotten, or unappreciated in your home, or in this church, or in the whole wide world, take heart in our sermon on Joseph. Turn the page.

Frankly, very little is known inside or outside of the Bible about Joseph. There are few references to him at the time of the Nativity in Matthew and Luke. Mark, the first writer of the Gospels, does not mention him at all. John has two mini-references, one of which implies that Joseph was not all that important.

He is mentioned, I will say, though we do not have time or real interest to go into it today, in many of what are called the non-canonical books, the New Testament apocrypha. Several writers noticed in the first few centuries that there was no adequate mention of Joseph. They were prompted

to correct that. In the Proto-Evangelium of James, one of my favorites of these many, many non-canonical fragments and books, stories of Jesus not in the Bible, there are some very interesting items about Joseph.

A couple of years ago, Mrs. Cromie and I were able to go to the Holy Land. And, of course, we went to visit Nazareth, the home town of Joseph and Mary, and for most of his life, of Jesus. What a marvelous place! Talk about a city set on a hill which cannot be hid.... That is where Jesus got the idea. Nazareth, as it is called in modern Hebrew, sits upon a hill; in fact the word "Nazareth" in the language means "The Crowning Touch", or a lighthouse.

As we wound our way up the long road to get there, our guide said: "Now, I want to tell you that there are three great periods in the history of Nazareth." Hmmm.... "That is interesting", I said to myself. "What are the other two?" She said: "There is the Byzantine period in the Fifth Century, A.D., the Crusades in the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries, and the present modern resurgence. It is a complex city now of nearly 100,000 people" (There were probably three or four thousand when Jesus was alive). I objected: "There is also a fourth period." She was not as interested as I in the fact that for thirty years, God Incarnate lived there. And sadly, too many of the people of Nazareth do not know it either.

Up there, in the center of the modern city, there is an enormous glass cathedral, something like the Crystal Cathedral, only more substantial and stronger looking, The Church of The Annunciation, a tribute to Mary. Underneath the altar, carved out exquisitely and brought up to date, is the little cave where it is said Mary was born. All around the Cathedral there are different depictions of the Virgin Mary, adapted from many different nations. It is really quite tastefully done, and I enjoyed it very much.

As we left the Church of The Annunciation, our guide said: "Well, Doctor, let's go back down now. You wanted to go to Cana of Galilee." I said: "Wait a minute. What about Joseph? Isn't he here anywhere?"

I did not know it would become a sermon, it was a little gift to me. She said: "Oh, yes, there is a little church around the corner, named the Church of St. Joseph." I said: "I want to see it." Off the beaten path, in a quiet little lane, the most peaceful moment I had in three days of travel in Galilee was in honor of Joseph, the Father of our Lord. You might guess that it has the most exquisite and complete wood carvings, Joseph having been a carpenter. There are paintings, many of them rather ordinary, you might say, but some artistic and wonderful. Each time they show Joseph, sometimes with Jesus, it's almost as if there were a little

tug of rivalry going on between this church and that church, which is not uncommon.

There is a picture of Joseph overseeing Jesus in the carpenter shop. Downstairs in the crypt, running below and behind the altar, there are some stained glass windows. The first depicts the scene where Joseph is lying on his deathbed. His son, Jesus and wife Mary are tending to him. No one knows for sure when Joseph died. It has always been assumed that he passed away sometime after Jesus was twelve. He does appear in the Temple, you remember, when Jesus stayed behind, and his parents had to go back and find him. But there is no other mention of Joseph. Mary is always there, as I have said, and occasionally the brothers and sisters of Jesus. So, it is reasonable to assume that since he is not mentioned, he probably died. In that stained glass, an artist of Nazareth, out of reverence for Joseph, wanted to have the moment recorded where the living Messiah, his son, was blessing him, as I am sure he did.

The second stained glass window shows a touching scene. It depicts the marriage of Joseph and Mary. Now, if you remember the Scripture, they were engaged when Mary was found to be with child. The Bible does not mention a wedding, even if it says he took her for his wife. In that marvelous little window, the rabbi is blessing the marital union of Mary and Joseph.

To move closer to our topic, let us look at the few instances where Joseph is mentioned in the Bible, and try to find the Gospel....

The first place, curiously, comes after a long list of names in the genealogy, as Matthew puts it forth. I need to tell you Biblical scholars that when Luke sets forth the genealogy of Jesus, it is a different story. There is an explanation for it, but sadly, the father of Joseph is named Heli in Luke, and the traditional name Jacob comes from Matthew. Luke apparently had a variant reading. Any genealogist will tell you though, if you try to go all the way back to Adam, you are bound to make some mistakes. Matthew, who obviously believes in the Virgin Birth, yet goes to great pains to trace the lineage of Joseph, the husband to Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Well, at any rate, in either case (Are you listening?) Jesus became, or was the son of Joseph. Ancient Jewish law said that if the father acknowledged parenthood, the definition of the acknowledgment was that he chose the name of the child. By the way, Joseph was obedient in naming him as the angel commanded. When he agreed to name the child, he was saying: "This is my son." Accepting paternity is as important as paternity itself. Sometimes a natural father chooses not to be a father, for whatever reason. If you ever lived in a family, a loving family where

children are adopted, then you can understand what it means for the Bible to say that Joseph was the father of Jesus.

If you have ever married a second time, and your wife or husband had children, and you adopt them into your soul and family, and take care of them as your very own, it is often more meaningful than natural parenthood itself. So... Joseph was the father of Jesus.

Secondly, to move along, he was a good father. You can imagine how Joseph taught him. The eyes of his father were turned to the son in the shop among the customers and vendors. How Joseph must have loved the poor and helped them! The son turned out to be a wonderful man, as well as a wonderful Savior: one who loved the poor; who cared for the weak; who healed the sick; who took care of the elderly. And, while I know that the Incarnational aspect of theology assures that he is God, still, Jesus as a man, also had to learn how to live.

Further, we assume Joseph died while Jesus was a teen. Far too often I have had to offer funeral prayers over the father of teenage children. It is a horrible time. If Jesus was tempted and vulnerable in all ways such as we, you can be sure that he went powerfully deep into his soul to find the strength he needed, when Joseph left him. And remember, Jesus

originated the name of God as "Father." I love to think it came from the fatherhood he experienced with Joseph. Out of that experience he learned the one thing everyone needs to learn: when your parents are gone, there is an Eternal Father who is forever there; who loves so totally that He can reach down to lift us up.

To take it further, suppose that you had been the father of Jesus, and husband to Mary. To understand it, start with the Announcement to Mary....What would you do if you were engaged to a girl, and she told you she was with child, and you were not the father?

And then the dizzying aspects of angels and stars and wise men at his birth.... And then, within the first two years, you were told to go to this foreign country of Egypt, whose language you do not know, because a lunatic king was about to execute every infant son. Imagine the terror; and the bewilderment after Herod died, of coming back and going up to Nazareth again....

The only reported incident of Jesus' childhood when he caused his parents trouble was when he stayed behind in the Temple.

You can be sure Joseph was not very impressed by Jesus. Talk about being about your father's business. There

is one apocryphal Gospel record where Joseph actually twisted his ear in the middle of the Temple, saying: "For goodness sakes, you can be about your father's business in Nazareth too!" (I doubt that.) You can be sure he was not entirely happy.

And then, as life went on, Mary had to watch her son leave home.... That's hard, particularly if her husband was gone; and eventually she had to watch him die.

Every time you have trouble with your children, just allow God to take control of it...use love and it will all work out for good.

Well, we need to hurry on. Joseph was of the House of David; he was father to Jesus; he was a good father...that's where we are. He was probably an older father. Tradition has it that he was at least twice Mary's age. And one apocryphal writer wrote the story of how Joseph got married the first time when he was forty, and after being widowed at 89, he married Mary. Not very likely, but it was an attempt to assure the perpetual virginity of Mary. An 89-year-old husband is not very likely to have a son.

Well, let us pull it all together before we go.

The lessons from Joseph -- I am talking to you children, and adults, and teens, and college students home for the holidays, up to the oldest one here.

(1) If you do what is right, as opposed to what is wrong, God will take care of the rest. If you compromise yourself, you have nothing left at all. Can you imagine the snickers in Nazareth: "Ha-ha, no fool like an old fool! She is with child! Ha-ha!" Joseph did not care. Having heard the voice of God, and seen what was right, he did not care what anybody else thought. He was pleasing God, not Mammon. Young people especially: Be committed to what you feel is right, and God will take care of you always.

(2) Secondly, if you have to live in the shadow of somebody else, and many people do; if you do not receive the spotlight on center stage, in your church, in your work, in your family, in your marriage, or if you do not feel that life is fair...it is all right. It is better to fail in a cause which will ultimately succeed, than to succeed in a cause which will ultimately fail.

There are two kinds of success in the world. One is a worldly success. I see a lot of that in Fort Lauderdale. And I see some of it in our church. People who want to get to the top and be known, to have others say as they walk around the town: "Oh, isn't he wonderful?" That success goes

on to politicians, to corporate executives, to sports, to entertainers, etc.

But there is another kind of success. Thank God there are those who are willing to give themselves up to seek it. That is the success of being part of something greater than you could ever be on your own. To be a successful person within...to be known as one who believes...to be known as a good mother, grandmother, father, neighbor or church member...all right? To be a faithful follower of Jesus....That kind of success often is also attached to the famous; but many times it is not.

Yet, it is the success we should be seeking...for finally, in a sentence, I am coming to you now: if your service and life are given to Jesus Christ, as they brought everything to the manger...and as Joseph lived in the shadow of Mary and of Jesus...if you open up your life and heart and soul and hopes and all, so that Jesus can come in, "Be born in us today", you have found the key to what you need. For unless and until the Christ of Bethlehem is born in you, you have missed the meaning of Christmas. Now and forevermore. Amen.