

“The Quiet Man”  
Matthew 1:18-25  
December 19, 2010

There is an awful lot of singing that happens this time of year. WRAL FM has been playing Christmas carols since Thanksgiving, and man, do you hear what I hear? Because if you do, for four weeks now, you’ve heard how Grandma got run over by a reindeer on an O, Holy Night. You’ve heard how Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer hijacked in mid-air the celebration of the birthday of Mary’s Boy Child. And, you’ve heard how the magic hat gave life to Frosty the Snowman in the bleak mid-winter. I’ll be the first to admit, that some of what passes for Christmas music grates my last nerve. But, the SINGING is actually biblically sound. When you turn to your own Bibles this year to reacquaint yourself with the Holy Family, you will find that all the stories about the birth of Jesus are full of singing. Mary sings – the song that Allison so eloquently read. Zechariah sings. Anna and Simeon sing. Elizabeth sings. The angels sing. And according to some legends, even The Friendly Beasts in the stable sing. After all, Joy to the World, heaven and nature are all singing...with one big, fat exception. Joseph. Joseph does not sing. Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine does not even speak.

When it comes down to the Nativity story, it’s as if Joseph is an afterthought. The fact that to survive in the ancient world, Jesus needed an earthly father to give him a name and to provide for his earthly mother seems to be a forgotten fact. It reminds me of a story of two sisters in elementary school who were looking at a book of religious pictures and came across a painting of Mary and baby Jesus. "See there," said one, "that's Jesus and that's his mother." "Where," the other asked, "is his father?" Her sister thought for a moment and then explained, "Oh, he's taking the picture." It’s easy to follow her logic. When we view the word pictures taken straight out of our family album about the birth and life of Jesus, Joseph must be taking those pictures. And on the rare occasion that Joseph sets the self-timer and makes it in the photograph, he is all blurry. In Mathew and Luke, the only two gospels that give us an account of Jesus birth, Joseph –this really significant person does not say a word.

His story starts out like a slow movie. Mary has stopped by and it’s been a day of bad news. The sky darkens outside of Joseph’s window. The fire that warms his house begins to sputter out. Joseph just wants the cold, hard day to end. He doesn’t feel like eating, doesn’t feel like talking, doesn’t even feel like a Scrabble game – in fact, he just feels sick. So, he takes to his bed and falls asleep with all of those characters and events running around unsupervised in his unconsciousness. On this Silent Night, all of THAT morphs into a dream – not of a White Christmas – but a dream that rocked his world far more than a blanket of snow ever could.

Joseph had a plan for his life – like most of us, he had hopes. He had goals. He had been matched up with his bride elect, and I’m sure he had plans for how they would spend their life together. I’m sure he had rehearsed their married life in his heart and in his mind. Places they would go. Celebrations they would have. Secrets they would share. Children they would raise. There was a blissful order to it all, until Mary tells him that she is already great with child, pregnant. Merry Christmas, Darling. Can you imagine the shock, the betrayal that Joseph must have felt? The news must have kicked him to his knees. What Child Is This? He knew that this pregnancy had nothing whatsoever to do with him. So what if they had not officially been pronounced husband and wife? In those days, engagement was a legally binding arrangement. A pregnancy before the wedding meant adultery, and adultery meant divorce. Joseph struggled to do the right thing. As an observant Jew, he turned to the law which gave him two options:

divorcing Mary publicly – he could Go, Tell It On the Mountain to anybody who would listen which would most certainly clear his name, but would mean humiliation for her and quite possibly stoning; or option two, he could quietly "dismiss her" through a private divorce. Joseph resolved to "dismiss her quietly." Gotta love him for that.

I wonder, when faced with those choices, why Joseph didn't try to humiliate Mary. He had every reason to believe that Mary was pregnant by another man. He had every reason to be furious. And, we know that so many times, when people feel betrayed or hurt or even just frustrated, they lash out. It's a darker side of human nature, but it feels natural when someone hurts us to tell everybody we know how wronged we are. It feels natural to try to recruit everybody we can to 'our side.' To yell out those hurtful words, or to send off that stinging email, or to speak harshly to the cashier that is moving too slowly. After all is said and done, we come to the humbling realization that we are quite capable of losing our decency in the most spectacular of ways. I'm going to take a moment away from our Twelve Days of Christmas to speak to that and climb on a soap box. Decency is a disappearing value. Decency gets traded in for self-righteousness every day. Decency gets exchanged for self-expression. Decency gets shoved to the background so that personalities can take center stage. A public recent example came about last week, I read an on-line report about the death of Elizabeth Edwards – we all read about her death, but I made the mistake of reading the electronic comments that people made in response. Some were indecent-not in the use of vulgar language – but in their heartlessness from self-identified Christians. Decent people, Christian people, no matter their political leaning, do not make fun of sick people. Decent people do not mock dying people. Decent people do not poke fun of weaker people, or disabled people, or mentally challenged people, or different people. In our society, as a whole, I believe we have lost our decency. I believe we are unable to be embarrassed by our indecency. In many cases, we are proud of it. We feel totally righteous in our ability to speak our minds – because, by God, we're right.

So, I am amazed, given what happened to Joseph and given that Mary Had a Baby that wasn't his, I am amazed that he stayed decent. I am amazed that he did not meet his buddies at the local tavern and tell them ALL what Mary had done. I am amazed that he did not email his fellow believers from the local synagogue and tell them ALL how awful Mary was. I am amazed that he did not facebook to the entire world how he had been wronged by Mary. I am amazed that he did something that Christians have struggled with since day one – that would be taking the high road – rising above. Joseph did not parade his pain for all to see – he sought vengeance not even Once in Royal David's City. He decided to do the decent thing – he got really quiet – which is always a good thing to do, by the way, when your mouth is about to take over. Joseph got quiet, and he took a nap. Wouldn't the world be a much more civilized place if we all took naps instead of taking revenge? That's what Joseph did – he decided to keep quiet about pregnant Mary and then he took a nap.

Closing our mouths and waiting is a wonderful invitation for God to do something. For Joseph, God sends an angel, from the realms of glory to set him straight. I know we really highlight the baby and the shepherds and the wise men and multitude of heavenly hosts and all that happened away in the manger. But, none of that would have happened without Joseph. The whole grand experiment of saving the world hangs on what happens with Joseph. The redemption of everybody rests in Joseph's dreams. If Joseph believes the angel, then everything is on. The show can go on. Mary will have a home and a family and her child will be born the son of David – David was Joseph's lineage, you know. So, it was very important, for the sake of the prophecies, for Joseph to claim this child as his. But, if Joseph does not believe, then

everything grinds to a halt. If he wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes on to the courthouse to file divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever.

You see what Matthew is doing here? He's putting part of this story –the greatest story ever told – into the hands of a regular persona like us – an ordinary Joe. And, ordinary Joe's belief is as important as the Holy Mother's belief. God and all the angels are on her side, but it takes both parents to give birth to this remarkable baby boy – Mary to give him life, and Joseph to give him a name: Jesus, son of David, from whose house the Messiah shall come.

But, the heart of this story is more than a name. The heart of the story is a guy who finds his life off track: his fiancée is pregnant, his trust betrayed, and his future revoked until further notice. It is about a righteous man who is set into a mess he had nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is there. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it all in search of an easier life, Joseph claims the scandal of it all and gives it HIS name. He owns the mess, and the mess becomes the Brightest and Best – the place where the Messiah is born.

Is that how God still works? Well, each days does hand us situations and people and events beyond our control, with messy parts of our lives we would not choose for ourselves – who chooses to be sick, who chooses the people who steal their hearts, who chooses those dips into life that light us up on the inside or cast us off into pitch darkness? The idea that God has anything to do with the messes in our lives seems a little far-fetched –I'm pregnant by the Holy Spirit – a little far-fetched. But, if we get quiet, if we STAY quiet long enough for God to speak, we might get a surprise you only dream about – a whisper coming on the wings of angels. “Fear not. This may not be the life you planned, but God can be born here, if YOU will permit it.”

How about that? God's big entry into the world required human partners – even now, especially now. The message for us is that the sun comes up each morning on a world run amuck, but as believers, we cannot dismiss it quietly to fend for itself. We must give our name to the mess. We must be the voice of hope when indecency parades itself in. We must be the hand of peace when we travel unknown roads. We must be the voice of joy when grief or anger or worry settles in. We must be the heart of love when heartlessness rules the day. It's a big job, but one that Jesus promoted ordinary people to do. Love really did come down at Christmas. And, if we choose, we get to grab hold and carry the Christ Child into this weary world ...so that all who see our kindness and all who see our compassion can't help but know that not only is it Beginning to Look a lot like Christmas, Christmas is here and it's not going anywhere. Surely, that will make all us Ordinary Joe's sing for joy.