

What about Joseph?

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12:47

I'm a big fan of Saturday Night Live and they've been performing great sketches anticipating Christmas. A recent episode aired when John Goodman was hosting and it was a modern depiction of the three wise men. SNL set it up by relating, "But there is a lesser fable about three lesser men who followed soon after. They weren't from the Far East but rather from the east coast, mainly Long Island and New Jersey. They were the three wise guys." [1]

The scene opens with John Goodman, Sylvester Stallone, and Robert De Niro wearing turbans, track suits, and gold chains, riding on camels. Some of the dialogue is not exactly church appropriate, but I appreciated one exchange. One of the three wise guys says, "I'm hearin' things, ya know, this kid's gonna be big." Another replies, "I hear his father's in construction." "Yeah, little Joey from Nazareth is all grown up." And then the kicker, "Yeah, but I hear the kid might not even be his." "Where did ya hear that?" "I don't know, from a couple of angels, I hear things ya know? Relax." [2] It dawned on me mid-sketch that poor Joseph is still getting harassed more than 2,000 years later about his role (or lack thereof) in the birth of Jesus Christ, and on a late night comedy show no less!

When we consider the Christmas story, we tend to hone in on Mary. Mary is for sure the mother of Jesus of Nazareth; no one tends to dispute this fact even from a historical perspective. And Mary has her beautiful, moving moment in the Gospel of Luke, the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." [3] We Protestants may not always know what to do with Mary, but I don't think anyone would argue about whether she really was the mother of Jesus or not.

When you think of nativity scenes, it's always Mary at the center with baby Jesus. Joseph tends to stand stoically beside them but often apart or behind them. Sometimes it's the manger holding Jesus that separates Mary and Jesus from Joseph. Sometimes it's hard to even differentiate Joseph from a shepherd! I've seen many icons and paintings of Madonna and child, but I can't recall many images of just Joseph holding Jesus adoringly off the top of my head. Can you?

Joseph has a supporting role in this dramatic story we will fully experience on Christmas Eve. In our own Christmas Pageant here at Pilgrim, Joseph has a minimal speaking part. Sorry about that, Tom! Even today, when we get to hear part of the Christmas story from Joseph's perspective in the Gospel of Matthew we don't hear his voice. He doesn't speak. In Luke, Mary meets the Angel Gabriel, accepts her role to play after some back and forth conversation, and later bursts into song basically. In Matthew, Joseph simply agrees to do as the angel commands him in his dream. We're told, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus." [4]

But we don't hear what Joseph thought about all of this, not really. We don't hear his voice. We don't hear his first-hand perspective even though it would have been narrated by Matthew anyway! Mary gets a whole duet with the Angel Gabriel in Luke and a catchy solo awhile later. Joseph is basically silenced. We don't know how he would have reacted to people like those three wise guys joking that this kid they're going all the way to Bethlehem to visit isn't even his. Would he have gotten mad? Would he have been embarrassed and resigned to the taunts and

just ignored them? Would he have defended Mary and the angel in his dream who declared that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit"?[5] He doesn't even get a speaking part in what is his story too—the righteous man and a descendent from the house of David who was unwilling to expose his young, pregnant fiancé to public disgrace.

What we do see is the depth of Joseph's love for Mary and for God. Maybe this love goes beyond words, for no words can adequately express his compassion. It's like St. Francis said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." I realize how strange it is to quote St. Francis while I'm preaching, but you get the idea.

Last Sunday in our Confirmation class, Dana and I were teaching our confirmands about Jesus and the Gospel of Luke specifically. We watched a short video and were speaking about the depth of Jesus' love for all the folks to whom he ministered and the depth of his love for God and his sacrifice and selflessness at the end of his life. I have to give a shout-out to Jeffrey who reflected that what we see in Jesus' life and death is that "love isn't a sometime thing, it's an all the time thing." Jeffrey said that this quote came from a saying they use for football at LHS. It's an adaptation of a Vince Lombardi quote—"winning isn't a sometime thing, it's an all the time thing." Regardless, the adaptation was brilliant and it's applicable to Joseph's story too.

Joseph's love for Mary and for God wasn't a sometime thing, it was an all the time thing. This meant that he changed his mind about how to respond to this unexpected pregnancy. In this instance, his heart won over his head, because his love for Mary and for God was an all the time thing. This meant that he took Mary as his wife anyway, and that he named this child Jesus as the angel instructed, knowing in his heart that Jesus was to be Emmanuel. This meant that he raised this child and loved this child and did not abandon this child or his mother even though all popular conventions, rules, laws, customs, and traditions dictated that he should have. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann relates, "God will recruit as necessary from the human cast in order to reorder human history." [6] God recruited Joseph to help tell a new story, a story that would change human history, a story born in a manger in Bethlehem but a story that went back a whole lot further than that mysterious night.

In just three days it will be Christmas. And we often feel immense pressure to make Christmas perfect. Perfect presents, perfect meal, perfect decorations including the perfect tree and the perfect lights, perfect moments, and perfect memories from the whole shebang to cherish forever. But we have to remember that the first Christmas was not a flawless production. Moreover the back story to the birth of Jesus Christ is just about as imperfect as you can get. Behind those cutesy nativity scenes we display lies a mysterious, wondrous, amazing event I am convinced that we can never fully understand. And it's still just a little bit scandalous 2,000 years later.

Having an imperfect Christmas is what Joseph's story is about. Not just imperfect circumstances during the birth itself in that borrowed bed of straw and hay for the animals. But everything that led up to the birth and the fact that Joseph had resolved to walk away from the whole thing. The birth of Jesus was never the perfect scenario for Joseph.

In more secular culture, the perfect symbol of the imperfect Christmas is always the Charlie Brown Christmas tree. Charlie Brown is told by Lucy to get the biggest aluminum tree he can find, maybe painted pink. Yet he comes back to his friends with this small, pathetic excuse of a tree. A tree with hardly any needles and the ones that are there are falling out and it's uneven and scraggly and it almost snaps in two when he tries to put one ornament on it. But that small, pathetic, scraggly tree is symbolic of this imperfect Christmas we see in Joseph's story and in our stories too. It's symbolic of our imperfect selves that we bring with us wherever we go and to whomever we're with on our journeys.

Public Theologian Aaron Klink sums it up like this, "Unexpected things, things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work. Amid all our less-than-picture-perfect Christmases, the Christmas trees that are not quite as perfect as we want them to be, the lives that are not as perfect as we want them to be, God does something new . . . so many times God opens a door for us, or gives us a vision, beckoning us to trust and follow." [7]

I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but I wish you all an imperfect Christmas. Because it's just so much more real that way. And if an imperfect Christmas is good enough for God, then it's good enough for us. It's what we see in Joseph's story and in our stories. Because in imperfection and flaws, sometimes unexpected miracles burst forth. It's like songwriter Leonard Cohen said, "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." [8] So bring to God your imperfect offerings, your doubts and your fears, your scraggly pathetic Christmas trees, and your cracked selves. God will do a new thing for all of us. And somehow God's light will get in, and just in time for Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Saturday Night Live, December 15, 2013.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Luke 1:46-49, NRSV.

[4] Matthew 1:24-25, NRSV.

[5] Matthew 1:20, NRSV.

[6] Walter Brueggemann, as quoted by Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey in UCC Sermon Seeds, "Emmanuel: God With Us," December 22, 2013.

[7] Aaron Klink, Pastoral Perspective of Matthew 1:18-25 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1, 94 and 95.

[8] Leonard Cohen, "Anthem."