

JOSEPH, THE FORGOTTEN FATHER
Matthew 1:18-25

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First Baptist Church
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I've been hanging around Christmas for a long time. Though I'm not often found on center stage, I am always somewhere in the nativity. Often seen, but really seldom heard. I thought that you might want to hear the story from my perspective. You never grow tired of the Christmas story, do you? A story of love, a story of sacrifice, a story of humility, a story of faithfulness, a story of promise kept, a story of angelic messengers, a story of hope. I've been a part of the story from the very first Christmas, but I suspect that you do not know me very well. Sometimes I feel like the father of the bride in a wedding. Nobody notices him, but he has to pay for the whole affair. I'm glad that you enjoy celebrating Christmas, but it really did cost me a lot. Let me tell you a little about myself.

My name is Joseph.

My small claim to fame is that I happen to be a descendent of David, Israel's greatest king. That really isn't much to boast about. David lived a thousand years before I was born. By the time I came along, there were hundreds – even thousands – of people who had been descended from David. Yet, it was something I was proud of, the same way that some of you are proud of being related to the heroes of the Alamo. You boast a bit about tracing your family lineage back to people fifteen generations ago who came over on the Mayflower. That is sort of what it is with me.

When I lived, King David had long since died and his reign had lost its glory. We were living in moral and spiritual darkness. There were times in which things were so dark my countrymen didn't even dare to dream (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: The Neglected, by Haddon Robinson)

Like David, I grew up in a town called Bethlehem. It was a small town located just 7 miles south of the capital city of Jerusalem. It was difficult at times to make a living there. I had to go where the work was. When I was a young man, I followed a job up north to the hill country near Lake Galilee, and there I made a new home in a town called Nazareth.

I'm really surprised that some of you have heard about Nazareth. It was small, just a hamlet, and often the butt of jokes. Some of my countrymen used to go around jesting, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Having lived there, I wondered if anything, good or bad, could have come out of Nazareth, it was so small. But I did not go to Nazareth because it was a great city. I went there to work my trade.

I'm a carpenter. That tells you something about me. I mean, carpenters are practical people. We're not poets or philosophers. I like to work with things you can handle and measure, cut and saw. I enjoy working with wood. You know, there is a spirit in wood – cedar, oak, pine. Some wood is as hard as metal. Other wood is as pliable as clay.

But wood is an honest thing. I understand that some of you have doors that are hollow in the middle. I don't want to insult you, but you ought to be ashamed. I like wood that's wood clear through, wood that has integrity. I like that in wood; I like that in people. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: *The Neglected*, by Haddon Robinson)

Of course, as a carpenter, we lived modestly. It is always difficult on a man's ego not to be able to provide the best things for his family. I struggled with that fact. It really hit me when we went to the temple for the purification of Mary and our new baby, Jesus. Two offerings were to be given – a lamb and a turtle dove – but since we had not even the money to buy a lamb, we were permitted to sacrifice only two doves.

Even though things were tight, I was really happy in Nazareth. It was there that I met Mary. She was about 15 years old when she caught my eye.

Before long we were betrothed. Betrothal was sort of like engagement, except that it was much more serious. It lasted a year, even more. During that period, families got to know each other. They worked out a dowry. They searched the records at the temple in Jerusalem, because it would have been possible in a country as compact as ours for near relatives to marry and not even know it.

It was a period in which I came to love Mary more. She was a wonderful combination of girl and woman. There were times when she laughed and her eyes danced with joy. It was ecstasy to be with her. And as a woman she was as solid as the pillars at the temple. She was thoughtful. She pondered life. And not only that, she could also give expression to her thoughts in songs. Some of her songs were absolutely magnificent.

That period of betrothal was a period in which I dreamed. I thought of building a house for Mary and for the children we would have. I dreamt of what life would be with her. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: *The Neglected*, by Haddon Robinson)

It only takes a moment for a dream to turn in to a nightmare. Mary became quiet and withdrawn, as if she were keeping some secret from me. When I asked her what was wrong, she refused to talk about it.

A job in Capernaum called me away for a few days. While I was away I wondered what was wrong – wrong with my Mary. Had I done something to offend her? Was her family pushing her to marry someone who could provide more than a carpenter could provide? Had they found something in the temple records that indicated that we should not be married?

By the time I made it back to Nazareth, I was beside myself. I pleaded with Mary not to shut me out of her life – but I was completely unprepared for her answer.

Pregnant? Pregnant?

She began to weep. Of all the possibilities that I had concocted, that one had never entered my mind. Pregnant! I knew that I had not been with her. If not me, who? How could it have happened? We had love, we had trust, we had a dream. Why?

Her blasphemous story about still being a virgin! Slap in the face! Messiah to all people from Nazareth?

I want you to understand that I am a righteous man. I try to live according to the Scriptures. I had a reputation in the community. As soon as they knew that Mary was pregnant, they would assume I was the father, and my reputation would be destroyed. I was furious. I was going to make it public. I was going to go before the elders at the gate and sever this relationship and explain I was not responsible.

I couldn't do that; I loved Mary. Even though my trust was shattered, and I felt I could not marry her, I would not expose her to public shame. I decided that I would sever the thing quietly and make up some kind of story.

Mary knew she had to leave Nazareth. She knew that the caustic gossip in that community would be impossible to stand. She decided to go South, to the area of Hebron, to live with her cousin, Elizabeth, and Zachariah, her husband. They would give her a home, a place to stay. They would protect her. Elizabeth had been like a mother, like a grandmother to Mary. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: *The Neglected*, by Haddon Robinson)

Elizabeth believed her and said, "Blessed are you among women. You are the mother of my Lord."

But even after Mary left, however, I could not get her out of my mind. I could not pay attention at work. I could not eat – I had no appetite. And on one of those torturous, restless nights, I had the most unusual dream. The angel of the Lord was before me and he said, "Joseph, Son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child within her is of the Holy Spirit. She will have a son and, Joseph, you are to call his name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins."

When I awoke from the dream, I was elated. I had a message from heaven. I realized that Mary had told me the truth. I was so filled with joy that as soon as I could I went down to Hebron and told Elizabeth and Zachariah what I had heard. I apologized to Mary for doubting her word. I took her and went back to Nazareth, and as soon as we could, we were married. I made her my wife. I swear to you in all that time I never touched her. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: *The Neglected*, by Haddon Robinson)

Mary forgave me for not believing her before. I was ashamed that I had doubted, but she understood the seemingly impossible nature of her explanation.

Know that I knew that it was all from God, all part of His Plan, the fulfilling of prophecy. But I was naive. I thought if God was in it that this meant that no troubles could occur. Boy was I wrong! I am a carpenter, not a theologian.

During Mary's ninth month, Caesar Augustus sent out a decree. He wanted a census for the purpose of taxation. That meant all of us males had to go back to the place of our birth. In your day, the census taker comes to you. That never occurred to Caesar Augustus. I knew I had to make that trip from Nazareth back to my home town of Bethlehem.

I wondered if I ought to take Mary. But when I thought of the criticism and gossip in Nazareth, I felt any risk we took was better than that. So we made the trip: three days, hard journey. I knew when I got to Bethlehem there would be people who would give us what we needed, and there were relatives who would take us in. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: *The Neglected*, by Haddon Robinson)

But when we made it to my relatives, they said that they were sorry but all the beds, the floor space, and even the porch had already been claimed as sleeping space. My wife was due, we both were exhausted – I had been to no Lamaze classes – I was frantic to find a place. Mary told me that her back had begun to ache, but it was probably just fatigue from the long trip. But the pains grew stronger, and I began to wonder if God really was in all of this. Finally, we found a cave outside of town – at least it offered some protection and rest from the elements.

And then He came.

When the baby came, I didn't know what to do; I'm a carpenter. Mary had to be both midwife and mother. I severed the cord then cleaned the child as best I could and wrapped him in cloths. I put him in a manger because the only other place to put him would have been on the filth of the cattle floor.

I had all kinds of questions. If this wife of mine was highly favored of God, and if this is something God had planned from years before, how do you explain the cave? How do you explain the dirt, the cattle, the loneliness? No one came from Jerusalem to celebrate the birth of our son. Nobody even came from Bethlehem. We were alone, completely alone.

No, that's not really true. There were shepherds, some country bumpkins. They came with the smell of the wineskins about them and they said they had heard an angelic choir out on the hillside. They came to look at our baby boy. But we felt the loneliness. Mary and I were not stone. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: *The Neglected*, by Haddon Robinson)

We went up to the temple, following the 40-day prescription of the law, for the purification of Mary and The Child. We were poor, and had only two doves to offer to God. We were surprised by the reaction of a man named Simeon and a woman named Anna – Simeon was full of the Holy Spirit and when he saw Jesus, he knew that he had seen the hope of the world. It had been promised to him that he would not die before he saw the Lord's Christ. Simeon held Jesus and said, "Lord, I am ready to die, my eyes have seen your salvation." Mary and I knew that Jesus was different,

but we were amazed at his words! Who had told him about Jesus? And Anna, an 84-year-old widow who served in the temple. The moment she saw our baby, she gave thanks to God.

After all of the hubbub of the census had subsided, I decided we would stay in Bethlehem. I wasn't about to go back up to Nazareth with all of the gossip there. We rented a house, and I took whatever jobs I could. After we were there a year or more, we had some visitors – astrologers from beyond the rising sun – from Iran. They said they had seen a star, and they had followed it to Jerusalem. They had gone to Herod, our half-breed king, and asked him about a new king to his throne. Then they had come further south to Bethlehem.

And here was our boy, Jesus, just a toddler. These pagan dignitaries came in, and when they saw him, they fell down on their knees and worshiped this toddler. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they left.

We needed those gifts. In a short time, I was warned in another dream that I was to take Mary and the Child into Egypt. Had it not been for that gold and expensive perfume, we could not have lived in Egypt. We were aliens. We were strangers. And they had no time for poor Jewish carpenters. I saw that gold as a kind of provision from God.

We stayed in Egypt almost two years. After Herod died, we came back. I wanted to settle in Bethlehem because of the relatives and all. But there was still political unrest. God directed us back to Nazareth. Here He is, the Creator of the entire universe, and He sends us back to Nazareth with its gossip and its raised eyebrows and its dirty jokes. I had all kinds of questions.

When I was young, I thought that if once in my life I were to see an angel, just one angel like our forefathers had seen, I would never doubt. I would always believe. I saw an angel. It was in a dream. When I had that dream and saw that angel, it was vivid and real to me.

There were times I wondered if it was possible that I so desired Mary that somehow in my dream I had made this come to pass. To be honest with you, Jesus didn't seem much like a savior of the world. Oh, he was good. He was obedient. But when He was an infant, Mary fed Him from her breast. You sing that hymn, "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." He cried. When we were back in Nazareth, He came to the table along with the other children. He didn't perform any miracles. When He fell in the streets of Nazareth and skinned his knee, it bled. I held Him on my lap to tell Him stories, and He fell asleep. He wasn't that different.

When He was about twelve, we went down to Jerusalem for a feast day. Our relatives and friends all went. On the way back, we were gone a day's journey, and we lost Him. We thought He was with the relatives. They hadn't seen Him. I had lost the Son of God. I didn't know what to do, so we retraced our steps. We climbed the mountain to Jerusalem. Here He was talking to the leaders of the people, asking them questions.

I said, "Look, you've driven us frantic. We didn't know where you were."

He said, “Don’t you know I have to be about my Father’s business?”

That sounds good in church, but when you hear that from a 12-year-old, you don’t quite know what to do. My point is He wasn’t that much different. I wondered. Oh, I wondered.

I could never express my doubts to Mary. I could never let her know that I did not have faith enough to shout down all my questions. And I couldn’t talk to the people in the village. They had much more earthy explanations for Jesus’ birth. In fact, He never lived it down. There were times when they would throw it in His face.

“We weren’t born of fornication,” they would say. “You have two fathers. We have one. You have a real father and then you have Joseph.” They never let Him or me forget it. I certainly wasn’t going to bring it up to them. I just wrestled with it.

One thing I did have was a passage in the Old Testament. Eight hundred years before I came along, a prophet by the name of Isaiah said that a virgin would conceive and have a son and would call his name Emmanuel, which meant ‘God with us.’ It was just a sentence, but I held onto that scrap of Scripture for dear faith. It’s really all I had.

Some of you here have a faith like Mary’s. It’s obedient. It’s strong. It’s rich. It’s devout. You’re God’s special people. Some of you, I think, are more like me – practical people. You live in a world of cause and effect. You like things that you can touch, feel, measure. You find it hard to believe.

Faith has its moods. After I was confronted by the angel, there were times I thought I would never doubt again. But there were times when the whole thing didn’t make sense to me. Some of you are like that. You believe your doubts; you doubt your beliefs. Sometimes you wonder if you really believe at all. I understand.

All I can say is that when I faced those questions, I just came down on the side of faith. I faithed it through in spite of my questions and my hurt. I felt I had to trust when I didn’t feel like trusting.

And that’s what God used. I, Joseph, put my thumb print on Jesus Christ. I taught Him to be a carpenter. He was creative. He could make oxen yoke that were easy. In fact, the folks in the village referred to Him as “the carpenter.” I taught Him that; I put my thumb print on Him.

Of course, He was the Savior of the world. He put His thumb print upon my soul, but it wasn’t easy. It’s just that when I thought I knew what God wanted me to do, I did it. I had faith enough for that.

That’s my story. I thought I’d share it with you. You want to celebrate Christmas and worship again the birth of Jesus. And you ought to. But I just wanted you to know that I, Joseph, had something to do with that. When God sent His boy to earth, He put Him into

the care of this carpenter, who sometimes believed his doubts and doubted his beliefs but faithed it through. You might want to think about that.

I'm not the main character of the story. But when you celebrate, you might remember that when God wanted someone to take care of His boy, He chose Joe, a carpenter, who believed the best he could. (*Preaching Today*, Joseph Davidson: The Neglected, by Haddon Robinson)