

GREATNESS STANDS IN THE SHADOWS: JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15

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At some point in my life I began paying attention to the people who played supporting roles in films. Sometimes, these actors and actresses were on-screen for a significant amount of time. And sometimes the roles they played were very small indeed but they “made” the movie.

Several days I was watching a light romantic comedy made back in 2006 titled *The Holiday*. The leading roles were played very competent, handsome young actors and actresses. But the part that “made” the film was a small, supporting role played by noted actor Eli Wallach. Wallach was near the end of his life when he made this piece of romantic fluff, but watching his scenes - he only had a few- was an absolute delight. He first appears in a long shot as an older man shuffling across a street with his walker, unable to identify his own home in a Southern California neighborhood, and as soon as I saw his walk I knew it was Eli Wallach.

There are several scenes where he, in an understated way, takes over the film. In one dinner scene, in a conversation with a younger woman whose world has been turned upside-down, he communicates more with his eyes than I can in words. He knows what he is doing. His role is small but when he is on screen he makes the movie.

At some point in my life I began paying attention to the people who played supporting roles.

This morning, as we continue our sermon series on *The Cast of Christmas*, we’re going to spend a few minutes talking about Joseph.

Only Matthew -written largely for the Jewish Christian community- and the Gospel of Luke - written largely for the Gentile Christian community- say much about Joseph. Mark and John say little if anything about Joseph. Clearly, in comparison to Mary, Joseph plays only a supporting role in the drama that was Jesus’ earthly life.

It’s interesting, if you look at the Renaissance masters who painted scenes of the holy family, many of them place Joseph over at the edge of their painting. He is, in many paintings, barely visible.

Matthias Stom, in one painting, shows Mary and the infant, Jesus, bathed in light while Joseph is in the shadows.

The artist Titian, not surprisingly, has the infant Jesus and his mother in strong light. Joseph, the father, is kneeling to the the right, in half-light, his hand on a walking stick. Something has disturbed Joseph, or he has heard someone approaching, or he is nervous and anxious about getting on the road for Egypt in a desperate attempt to escape Herod’s murderous soldiers. Joseph is distracted, looking away to the right, behind him, while Mary and Jesus are in the center of things.

In Raphael's *The Holy Family with Mary and Jesus Playing*, we can barely see Joseph. He is to the right of the picture in near darkness.

It would appear, both in the work of these artists and in the gospel accounts of the birth and life of Jesus, Joseph is a supporting character. He often seems to be standing in the shadows. Joseph is a key actor in the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke, and then he disappears from the scene.

Let's look at Matthew to see what the gospel writer tells us about Joseph.

The writer points out that Mary was engaged to Joseph. In first century Judaism, an engagement was a legal arrangement. A couple, if engaged, were seen -for all intents and purposes- as married but they were not yet living together until the formal ceremony took place.

Matthew 1:18 tells us that she was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." That's a stunning statement, an unexpected development in the lives of Joseph and Mary, and it raises more questions than it answers. For example, what exactly does it mean when Matthew says Mary was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit?" The Bible, if you have spent much time around it, often leaves our questions unanswered and the mystery of God's unexplained.

Verse 19, in the first chapter of Matthew, tells us that Joseph -"being a righteous man"- decides not to follow the Jewish custom and teachings about what you are to do when you discover your spouse is pregnant with a child you did not father. Some texts say the proper punishment for adultery is death by stoning. Joseph would have been justified, in the eyes of many, if he had -at the least- publicly sent her away and ended their engagement. But he loves her...even the shock of this unexplained pregnancy doesn't change the tenderness he feels towards her. So he decides, Matthew tells us, to end the engagement in a private way so she will not be exposed to public shaming and ridicule.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, says: "Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced."

We learn quickly that Joseph is righteous. He seeks to be obedient to the truth of God and the way of God and the laws of God. And yet he is also someone who lives out the scriptural truth with compassion. People of faith too often forget that, and you see it in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism: people live out their holy texts in a rigid, unyielding way. They'd rather prove their devotion to God by being unyielding, and they forget the way of grace. Joseph is righteous but the way of righteousness can be -should be- lived out with grace.

We learn Joseph is righteous...he seeks to be obedient to the way and truth of God.

We learn Joseph is a person of compassion.

Just when Joseph figures out what he is going to do, an angel shows up. Matthew tells us an angel intervenes in this story and comes to Joseph. (*The angel comes to Joseph in Matthew, and in Luke the angel comes to Mary.*)

The angel tells Joseph not to be afraid. I want you to learn that about angels: angels almost always show up to tell us not to be afraid. Which may be a good lesson for us if there is the slightest chance that God might use you or me as an angel: “Don’t be afraid” may be the very words God wants us to deliver to the people around us during this dark season.

I’ve got to think you know someone who needs to hear from you this afternoon or first thing tomorrow morning: “Don’t be afraid.” Then, the second phrase out of our mouths -if we are going to be an angel to our neighbor, co-worker or the person at the store- should be, “Wear your mask.”

“Don’t be afraid” and “wear your mask”: two good messages angels in December 2020 are called to deliver!

An angel shows up to tell him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife “for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Which must make very little sense to this carpenter from the north country. We said -last week- that angels often answer our questions and the answers they give us only lead to more questions!

The angel goes on to say (Matthew 1:21): “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Then, the angel quotes the prophet Isaiah who -in 7:14- says “‘a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel’, which means ‘God is with us.’”

Matthew, who writes his account of the life of Jesus for a largely Jewish Christian community, is often talking about Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures. So Matthew will often quote Jewish texts that talk about the coming of the Messiah. Prophecies in the Hebrew Bible are fulfilled in Jesus, Matthew makes sure we are told.

When Joseph wakes up, “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.”

So we have learned Joseph is a righteous man. He and God have an ongoing relationship. Every day they are engaged in an ongoing conversation.

We also have learned that Joseph is a man of compassion...he lives out his faith with compassion and grace.

The third thing we learn about Joseph is that he listens to angels. Which is a little surprising, honestly, when you realize he is a journeyman carpenter. Which may mean he is a homebuilder or a master craftsmen who builds furniture. He is a practical, measure-twice-and-cut-once kind of guy, I would think. You expect poets or lyricists or writers or pastor-types or Bible study leaders to listen to angels, but this man is a carpenter...a woodworker of the first order.

Some people have never let God tune their ears and hearts so they pick up whatever frequency angels are using. Some people go through life just not noticing. You know that. You may be one

of those people, and right now you are praying that God will give you ears to hear and eyes to see.

Some people go through life not noticing the way leaves smell when they have fallen from the trees in the fall, and then rain has come in the night. Some people go through life not noticing the moon rising above fields wiped clean of the corn that had spent all summer standing there. You ask, the next morning at work, if they noticed the orange moon that hung over the sky in the east, and they have no idea what you're talking about. They were standing outside at the same time you were, but they didn't notice. Some people can walk through a subway station where Joshua Bell is playing a beautiful piece of music on his violin, the music hanging in the air of that rough place like musical magic, and they don't hear it...they don't notice.

There are people who listen to angels, who pick up the frequency that carries truth from the heart and mind of God straight to us, and then there are others who just don't get it.

Joseph not only listens to angels, but Joseph is obedient to angels. Joseph trusts God.

And Joseph is willing to change his plans to accommodate what God is up to. He is willing to risk shame and scandal, himself, if it means doing what pleases God. So instead of doing the expected thing, instead of following through with the "Plan B" that he had developed, Joseph decides to trust that God is at the center of the mystery unfolding around them and takes Mary as his wife.

You know the story. Matthew tells us Jesus is born. Wise men or astrologers from the east, who have been watching the stars, arrive in Judea looking for a child born to be king of the Jews. Matthew doesn't tell us there were three magi or astrologers: people assume there were three because of the three gifts mentioned that are offered to the child named Jesus. Some scholars speculate that Jesus would have been a toddler by the time the visitors from the East arrived, but we really don't know.

When the visitors arrive, they start asking people if they know where the newborn king of the Jews can be found. Herod, who sits on the throne in all his paranoid glory, hears from his secret agents that there are visitors from the East asking about a child who will be the king of the Jews. So Herod calls the visitors in, tells them that he also wants to worship the child who is to be the king of the Jews and asks them to let him know when and where they find the child.

The visitors leave, they find the child named Jesus in Bethlehem, and then they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. So, Matthew tells us, they leave for home by another road. They slip out of Judea without telling Herod a thing.

After the visitors leave, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. The angel tells Joseph to get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there. Herod is searching for the child.

Joseph does it. Joseph leaves his hometown of Nazareth in the north, up in Galilee, behind, and heads south if that is what he needs to do to protect this child, to protect Mary and to protect the

fragile, beautiful, world-healing thing God is doing in the life of this child. The three of them, instead of heading back to Galilee, slip out of Judea and head for Egypt as the agents of Herod scour the neighborhoods of Bethlehem.

This carpenter has a fierce and faithful courage. Herod and his agents are on the hunt for the child who has been born to Mary, and the land is heavy with fear. Joseph doesn't step back from his wife and his child: he is relentlessly protective of them.

They travel hundreds of miles down into Egypt. They settle, as did their ancestors generations before under Joseph, in that foreign land.

When Herod dies, an angel again comes to Joseph in a dream and says, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." (Mt. 2:20). Joseph, this carpenter who hears angels and allows himself to be guided by angels, got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Joseph doesn't linger, notice, when the angel shows up and tells him to go down into Egypt or when the angel comes to him in Egypt and tells him to take Jesus and Mary back north to Israel. Joseph doesn't linger. Joseph doesn't hesitate. Joseph doesn't waffle back and forth: he is decisive. When he is led by the angel, he is decisive.

The carpenter is wise. He may be a carpenter man from a small town up in Galilee, at Nazareth, but he knows trouble when he sees it. So when Joseph hears that Archelaus, the son of Herod, now sits on the throne, the carpenter slows down. Joseph is on the alert. Murderous jealousy is in the blood of this royal family. Judea, the southern kingdom, still isn't safe.

Joseph is afraid to go to Judea, which is the territory between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean. It's the region where Jerusalem and Bethlehem are located.

Sometimes, you know, fear is a good thing.

The carpenter is fearful. He knows settling in the southern kingdom of Judea isn't safe, and just as he tries to figure out what to do, he has a dream. Matthew doesn't tell us that this Joseph is visited by an angel, this time, but simply that the man has a dream. In the dream, Joseph is warned about the danger in Judea, and so he takes his family north to Galilee where they settle in the town of Nazareth.

After this, Matthew really says no more about Joseph. The rest of the story of Jesus unfolds without much mention of Joseph. Some scholars speculate that Joseph died relatively early in Jesus' life. We hear Joseph mentioned in Luke, when Jesus is twelve years old, as the family goes to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. And then there is only silence, insofar as Joseph is concerned. His character exits the drama that is this redemptive story.

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There are two things that I believe God wants you to hear this morning. The first is that God is at work. You may not see it always. But God is at work. And God is often at work over at the edge of the canvas, working through the people who aren't at the center of things, but I want you to know God is at work.

Maybe you need to hear that because as you look around you, you see more darkness than light, more reason to despair than reason to hope.

I want you to know that God is at work, and I want you to know that God hasn't given up on you, or your neighbor, or the mess that is our country right now.

Just as you have to look over at the edge of the canvas, study the shadows, to see Joseph in many of the paintings of the holy family by artists of the Renaissance, you may need to look around you to see God at work in the shadows...through the people who will never be famous or powerful or popular or wealthy.

Over and over again, as I think about my experience of ministry at a flourishing, growing large congregation filled with movers and shakers (whatever that means), I remember the name of a woman named Dreama who worked in the church nursery. While everyone was paying attention to the preachers parading into the sanctuary in their white robes, preaching from that high pulpit, Dreama was down the hallway in the nursery rocking babies. I think God may have been doing way more to build God's kingdom and change the world than God was getting accomplished through those wordy preachers in the pulpit.

God is at work. I want you to know that today. You and I may just need to look a little more closely at the people who doing the right thing in quiet ways out at the edges of society.

I want you to know this: God is still at work today as God was at work in this story of a carpenter, a young woman and their infant son.

Here is another thing I believe God wants you to hear this morning: the role Joseph plays in this beautiful redemption song, this amazing story, is evidence that there is a place for you in what God is doing.

At some point in my life I began paying attention to the people who played supporting roles. So today God is nudging to look beyond the bright light, where Mary and the infant Jesus are at the center of the picture, and notice the quiet man standing in the shadows...barely in the picture at all, it might seem at first glance.

This story would have been different without him. Who knows, maybe this story wouldn't have happened at all without that quiet carpenter -did you notice that nowhere in the 1st and 2nd chapters of Matthew does Joseph say a single word?- doing what he did.

Mary, in the nativity story that Luke tells, sings a magnificent song about how God has blessed her and looked with favor upon her with this pregnancy. She sings about how God has acted to

scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, and brought down the powerful from their thrones. It's a beautiful song!

Joseph is quiet. Joseph doesn't say a word in the entire story of nativity that Matthew gives us. Joseph doesn't sing (at least Matthew doesn't mention any singing by the carpenter).

I find him to be a fascinating character, honestly. He isn't some chattering religious teacher, filling every moment of every day with words, but he is quiet. His hands are not soft but rough. His muscles have been tested and worked hard in the shop over years of labor.

He is quiet. He works with his hands more than he works with words. He is decisive. He is an action figure. He is courageous. He is willing to stand up to a king who is mad with paranoia and a lust for power. He risks everything to do the right thing.

Sometimes, you know, I hear people who are quiet, people who work with their hands, people who don't speak easily of their faith, wonder if there is a place in the Jesus community or church for them. I hear this especially from men. They don't feel as if they "fit" because they don't sing much or say much, and their hands are rough and maybe their words are sometimes rough.

Joseph says there is a place in this place, in this unfolding work of God to heal the world, to save the world, to bring light to the darkness, for you...if you understand Joseph. If you are more comfortable in the shadows, out of the limelight, than in the middle of the bright lights. If you would rather do than speak. If you would rather act than sift through theological ideas the way a baker sifts flour. There is a place for you in the community that God is creating and shaping. There is a place for you in the amazing, mysterious, sometimes scary, unfolding work of God here and now.

And there is this about Joseph: he has this way of hearing angels. And when he hears them speak, when he hears them tell him not to be afraid, or when he hears them tell him that the baby in his girlfriend's womb is a God thing, or when he hears them say "get up and go," he not only listens...but he is obedient. That can be a scary...and exciting...way to live, you know?

He has, down deep someplace in his heart and soul and head, a trust that God can be trusted.

The story would have been different without him. I don't know, maybe the story wouldn't have happened at all if there had not been this wiry, quiet, carpenter who heard the voices of angels and risked the wrath of a mad king and the laughter of his neighbors to do the right thing...the beautiful thing...the faithful thing...so the light could shine in the darkness.

I love Titian's painting of the family. I love the way he has Joseph kneeling to the right of Mary and Jesus. The carpenter is in the shadows, his hand is on a walking stick, and he is noticing something behind him. The man is there...ready to move...to go.

The story wouldn't have been the same without him. And the story God is writing, the amazing healing thing God is doing today, won't be the same without you...you know that, right?