

## “Missing Joseph” – June 17, 2018 - Fathers Day Sermon

Perhaps some of you have read Elizabeth George’s novel “Missing Joseph.” In its opening scene, a young woman enters an English country church and notices a painting in the narthex of Mary and Jesus. While she is studying the painting, priest appears and asks her if she has any questions about it. The woman asks, “Father, in paintings like these, where is Joseph? Why is Joseph always missing?”

This question has stayed with me over the years and Fathers Day seems an appropriate occasion to explore it further. With some historical and scriptural sleuthing, perhaps there is a way to Photoshop Joseph of Nazareth into the picture.

What do we know about Joseph? The most common answer to this question is “very little”; for Joseph may best be known for the simple fact that so little is known about him. In New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus, Joseph is hardly mentioned except for the accounts of Jesus’ conception and birth and the events that immediately followed. His name appears in the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but is missing from Acts or the epistles of Paul. Nor is Joseph ever quoted or known to have spoken. Even so, despite his virtual non-appearance in scripture, St. Joseph of Nazareth is venerated by many modern-day Christians and held up as model of Fatherhood. How could this be?

The list of what little we know about Joseph based on canonical and apocryphal sources is short:

- Joseph's lineage, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (1:1-16), traces back to King David and fulfills the prophecy that the Messiah would be a descendent of the “root of Jesse”.
- According to Luke, Joseph’s father’s name was “Heli”. According to Matthew, it was “Jacob.”
- Based on the 6<sup>th</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> century *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, a text in the Apocrypha, and other texts, Joseph was born between 90-100 BCE and died in Israel somewhere between 1 and 15 CE. These accounts make Joseph to be a much older man than the one depicted in all but a few of the paintings of the Nativity.

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- It seems plausible that Joseph might have died sometime during Jesus’ teenage years.

Joseph is said by multiple sources to have been married previously to a woman named Salome with whom he had six children, four sons and two daughters. Following Salome’s death he was a widower for several years before becoming betrothed to Mary. According to the apocryphal *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, Joseph was at some point given charge of the twelve-year-old Mary, who came to live in his household essentially as an au pair or nanny in order to help to raise Joseph’s his youngest son James (later known as James the Less). Such arrangements were common for young Jewish women within an extended family. It was deemed appropriate in this case since both Mary and Joseph were descended from the tribe of Judah and the House of David. Typically, these arrangements lasted until the young woman reached the marriageable age of 14½.

Another account mentions that prior to Mary reaching marriageable age, the priests of the tribe of Judah gave notice that they were seeking a well-established and upstanding kinsman to be Mary’s husband. Hearing this, Joseph then traveled to Jerusalem so that he would receive consideration as a suitable husband for Mary. His efforts were successful and Joseph subsequently became engaged to Mary.

As told by Matthew, when Joseph became aware of Mary’s pregnancy Matthew, he decided to quietly “dismiss” her but in a dream he was assured by an angel that the child was of the Holy Spirit and all would be well (Matt 1:18-25). They were then married and following his birth at Bethlehem, Joseph was regarded to be Jesus’ legal father. According to the Eastern Orthodox Church however, Joseph was never married to Mary. The confusion comes from different understandings of the Greek word that is typically translated as “betrothed.” The Hebrew word for betrothal is *kiddushin*, and is the first part of a two-part marriage process. Jewish couples who fulfill the requirements of *kiddushin* are considered married, until death or divorce. The second part is called “*nisuin*,” and is celebrated after the husband has completed further study of the Torah. Perhaps because of their hurried flight to Egypt, Joseph and Mary may not have been able to find a

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community in which to celebrate the second part but the point is moot since by Jewish standards they were already considered to be husband and wife.

The New Testament is silent with respect to the Holy Family's life once they had returned to Nazareth and Joseph had returned to his carpentry business. Joseph's occupation is mentioned only once in the gospels when he is referred to as a "*teketon*" which traditionally translates into English as “carpenter” - an artisan who makes objects in various materials. Some suggest that Joseph was a maker of yokes and plows; other suggest that he was a highly skilled craftsman who worked wood and semi-precious metal. *Teketon* can also signify both a simply educated person and a very learned man, who is wise and highly literate in the Torah. Based on his high standing in his tribe and family Joseph was most likely both.

Similarly, the Gospels are all but silent concerning Joseph and Mary's life together while their child grew toward manhood in strength and spirit, but based on his nature that we infer from both Matthew and Luke, we would like to imagine that Joseph and Mary settled into a quiet life, with Joseph serving humbly a leader in his community - leading by example rather than by words. Certainly, his known actions on behalf of his family describe an openhearted open-minded man of deep faith and devotion to God, a man open to mystical experiences including dreams and visions and messages from angels, and a man of compassion, who accepted his God-given responsibilities with gentleness and humility. Consider his actions following of the Annunciation, including his marriage to Mary which sheltered her from the threat of punishment by stoning for being an unwed mother, for finding a place in Bethlehem for Mary to be delivered and Jesus to be born in fulfillment of prophecy, to witness the arrival and departure of the Magi and then fleeing on God's orders to Egypt with his small family to escape Herod's slaughter of the innocents, and then returning home to restore them to traditional Jewish life that included daily devotional prayer and worship of God, doing his part to provide for their welfare through his work, teaching his adopted son Jesus the skills of his trade, and raising him to be a faithful Jew.

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In the face of circumstances that were well beyond distressing, Joseph seemed find a way to display both tenderness to Mary and obedience to God while being fully present as a husband and father.

In the of one modern writer, “How many mornings did he rise with the Egyptian sun, an alien in a foreign land, armed only with a tool belt, venturing into a hostile culture seeking enough employment to keep food on the Holy Family’s humble dinner table? How disciplined a man was he to have instructed the Son of God each day by praying the Jewish daily prayers - words that Jesus later recites as he responds to the first temptation of devil in the wilderness, and words that he learned at the feet of his parents.”

Consider how focused and detail oriented Joseph must have been to make a living as a carpenter, in which the work of his hands pointed straight back to the craftsmanship of his creator. Could there have been a more perfect metaphor for the earthly father of God? Consider the humility he demonstrated throughout the unique circumstances of Mary’s pregnancy. Ponder his obedience in traveling almost one hundred miles with a wife in her third trimester.

Furthermore, consider how many expressions of love and respect for others’ dignity and heritage Joseph and Mary must have modeled for their son? We can only wonder how much of what Jesus’ parents taught him influenced Jesus’ ministry.

Joseph appears in the Bible for the last time in the story of the Passover visit to the Temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. The story foreshadows the depth of Jesus’ growing awareness of his coming mission and Jesus for the first time speaks to his parents of “my father,” meaning God. This was most likely the occasion of Jesus’ Bar Mitzvah. Joseph and Mary were “amazed” by Jesus’ words but did not question them or argue with him - nor were their feelings hurt. Instead, they demonstrated only awareness and acceptance. My guess is that it was Joseph who primarily prepared Jesus for this event. Certainly this would have been in keeping with his faith and his character as a man of tradition and devotion to both his family and to God.

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It is likely that Joseph died within a few years of this occasion. According to Christian tradition Mary was a widow during Jesus’ adult ministry and Joseph is not mentioned as being at the Wedding at Cana, which occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ mission.

The story of Joseph of Nazareth is a simple and quiet one, a story of humility like the man himself. Yet, Joseph’s life is also remarkable because he never seemed to forget that his story was never about him but about his family and community, yet, I suspect if anyone at the time had asked him about his life, he would probably have shrugged and said, “I was just doing my job.”

So, back to our starting point: Joseph is not missing because he lives in the hearts and minds and souls of all fathers – and all parents and grandparents – who, regardless of their circumstances, focus on loving and teaching and sacrificing for their children and all of God’s children. Joseph is not missing at all when we become aware that he and Mary are God’s parental role models. Joseph is only missing when we become blind and lose our focus; when we allow children to be forcibly separated from their parents by poverty, war, death, hunger, natural causes, or, as happens every day along our southern border, for political reasons. Then it is our responsibility – it is up to us – to be Joseph – to be God’s servant and do everything we can to protect them until, like Joseph, we can bring them home.

[I have my own version and vision of how Joseph died. I imagine that he passed away in his workshop – at the close of a warm Spring day - as quietly as he lived – contentedly sitting on a wooden bench that he and Jesus had built together – and holding in his callused hands two small gifts he had just finished making – one for Jesus, in celebration of his coming of age - and one for Mary for her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. And as he passed, I imagine that he was smiling.]

Happy Fathers Day

Let us pray:

O God, who from the family of your servant David raised up Joseph to be the guardian of your incarnate Son and the spouse of his virgin mother:

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Give us grace to imitate his uprightness of life and his obedience to your commands; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*