



I never knew my great-grandfather. Born and raised in Lucca, Italy, he came to San Francisco around the turn of the century. He worked as a blacksmith making and repairing wagon wheels until the rise of the automobile put him out of business. He married my great-grandmother after seeing her picture and paying for her voyage from Lucca; I would come to know her quite well. She was the matriarch of my extended family; when she spoke everyone sat up and listened. Knowing her, I don't think my great-grandfather spoke much. His name was Joseph; to me he's Joseph the Silent.

I suppose partly because of him I'm intrigued by another Joseph. He too lived part of his life as an immigrant. He too worked with his hands making plows and maybe wheels. He too married a younger woman who far outlived him. He too is Joseph the Silent.

This Joseph was the adoptive father of Jesus. In the Scripture, he's talked to and he's talked about, but not a single syllable comes from his mouth. Joseph has the role of an extra; a character with minor credits. When we set up our nativity scenes, he's often the last one set up and the first one who falls over. Even though there are 15 cities and countless schools in the U.S. named after him, Joseph is the forgotten man of Christmas.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What you do speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you say." Perhaps Matthew, who narrates his story, wanted us to know that when it came to Joseph what he did spoke so loudly that he didn't have to say anything. Joseph was an incredibly simple person, but he was part of a story that was simply incredible. Take a closer look at his story with me. It starts in Matthew 1:18.

The Story of Joseph

Joseph was a small town carpenter betrothed to the girl down the street. Back then betrothal was something more than engagement and less than marriage. It began when a young man went to the home of the girl's parents and got their consent to marry her. A bride price was paid and a binding agreement was made which could only be ended by a legal divorce. But, the girl would continue to live at home and the marriage wouldn't be consummated for another year or so. During that time, any involvement with another person would be called adultery.

It was during this time Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant. She said "The Holy Spirit did it." Joseph must have thought,

"Yeah right. That's a good one." But he had a decision to make. The Old Testament said an adulterous woman should be stoned but in New Testament times that sort of thing didn't happen. Joseph would be expected to divorce Mary so he wouldn't be implicated in the sin. But he could do that in one of two ways. The normal way would be to make the reason for the divorce common knowledge and thus expose her to public shame. Such a woman would be hard pressed to ever find another husband. Or, he could do it quietly by a simple document and two witnesses with no reason given.

With that in mind, we can get what Matthew meant in v.19 when he says Joseph was "*a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, he desired to put her away secretly.*" The idea here is as a righteous man he had to put Mary away; he couldn't marry her. But, as a compassionate man he couldn't bring himself to do it in a way that would forever shame her. You might say that Joseph was upright without being uptight. He didn't have that kind of cold legalism which says, "I'm going to obey the letter of the law and hurt her in the process."

I know a lot of upright people, but many of them are cold and indifferent to the pain of others in the process. Often, we want so much to be right in a given situation we lose sight of the bigger picture of what God desires—mercy and compassion. We're afraid of compromising the truth and so we hold the truth in a way that annihilates people in the process. Why not? It's so much easier just to be black and white. Think of all the personal heartache Joseph could have avoided if he just did the "right" thing without any concern for what it would do to Mary.

But as he's trying to figure out how to go about it, an angel comes to him in a dream and confirms Mary's story about the Holy Spirit. As the angel is talking to Joseph, he says something interesting: "*Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.*" Why did he say that? He didn't say, "Don't be too angry to take her." Or, "Don't be too embarrassed to take her." But, "Don't be afraid to take her." I wonder if deep down Joseph believed Mary was telling the truth. Why else would he be afraid? Joseph had a holy hunch there was something mysterious and divine about this pregnancy and that made afraid; I think he feared the awesome power and holiness of God. He probably felt, "I don't want anything to do with this; I'm just a carpenter."

We all feel that when God gets close to us. We like our little Nazareths; our little shops or offices; our predictable routines.

We like our cozy little circle of friendships. But then Almighty God barges into our lives and gives us a glimpse of his power and love and we know we'll never be the same. We know we're being invited into something that will disrupt of our whole way of life. Everything made sense before; everything could be explained and controlled. Even though there is a strong attraction to God's plan, we're tempted to resist the invitation of God out of fear. What we fail to realize is the God who creates such fear is also the God who can remove it.

God may be calling you into something and you know it means change. You know your life will never be the same. Your first reaction is fear. Maybe he's calling you to leave a job, but you're afraid. Maybe he's calling you into some form of ministry or service, but you don't feel like you have the equipment. You're afraid; you're afraid of how that might change your life. Like Joseph, you can step over your fears and obey.

The angel told Joseph not only to take Mary as his wife but what to name the baby. In v.21 he says ***"She will bear a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*** Jesus is a fine Jewish name. It means "God is salvation." That's the whole reason Jesus came in the first place—to seek and to save lost sinners. In principle, Joseph couldn't have been opposed to it. But to name a son was no small thing to a Jewish father. The naming took place in a public ceremony eight days after birth. It was the father's right to name his firstborn son and he usually named him after a grandfather or even father. But, Joseph didn't have that privilege; he was told what to name the baby; he was reminded from the start that he really had no claim upon this boy.

It seems to me Joseph had all the responsibilities of fatherhood but none of the privileges. Even in these opening chapters of Matthew, when the angel speaks to Joseph about what to do with his new family, he refers to them over and over again as "the Child and his mother." He doesn't say, "Your wife and son..." I wonder if Joseph felt a bit like a stepfather in all of this. It wasn't really his son but he still had to change the diapers and pay the bills. He didn't have the joy a father has when he sees his own face in his son's face. He didn't have the joy of honoring his own father with a namesake. But somehow Joseph was willing enough to accept the responsibility without the privileges.

All this came to a head a few years later when Jesus was twelve. This was normally an important year for father and son; a year of training because at age 13 a boy would officially become an adult Israelite with all the responsibilities of keeping the law. Joseph had taken his family to Jerusalem for Passover. On the way back, traveling with a large caravan of neighbors and relatives, they went a day's journey before realizing Jesus wasn't around; they had assumed he was with someone else. They went back to Jerusalem and searched for three days. Imagine the panic

Joseph and Mary felt; they had lost the Son of God! But finally they found him in the Temple, seated with the scholars, amazing everyone with his wisdom. Mary, in typical motherly fashion, scolded Jesus for worrying them so. Then Jesus said something I'm sure Joseph would never forget. He said, "Why is it that you were looking for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house (business)?"

As usual, Joseph was silent, but think of what went through his mind. "My Father's house? For twelve years I've raised this boy; I've taught him **my** business; the business of making plows and fixing chairs." But, it doesn't say that. I think Joseph was humble. He refused to be controlled by self-pity or pride. He just took the boy home and raised him to one day leave his house for good.

Back to Matthew 1... The angel left and Matthew says in v.24, ***"Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a son and he called his name Jesus."*** Joseph did what he was told. He got married and when the baby was born he named him Jesus. Case closed. Let's settle down now and just be a regular family.

But before you know it he's swept into a remarkable chain of events. In Matthew 2 Joseph and his family enter into God's witness protection program. After a visit by Magi from the east the angel comes again and warns Joseph in a dream, ***"Get up! Take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him."*** Egypt! Who wants to go to Egypt? A number of Jews lived in Egypt. Most of them were dirt poor. Other Jews looked down on them for living so far away from Jerusalem. But Matthew says, ***"And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt."***

But then, sometime later, he had another visit in another dream. The angel said, ***"Get up! Take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead."*** Imagine Joseph telling Mary this. Mary says, "Another dream! I'm going to stop making that spicy food!" So they pack up and head home. That's no small thing. They wouldn't just hop on a plane, or cruise back in an air conditioned SUV. They had to walk in sweltering heat! But Matthew writes, ***"So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel."***

But where will they settle? Bethlehem? No. You guessed it—another dream: ***"Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth..."*** From start to finish that's four dreams and four conversations with an angel and four commands to do things totally contrary to his natural inclinations. But here's the real kicker—it's also four times that Joseph simply and quietly obeyed.

Simple Obedience

The most remarkable thing about Joseph is his obedience and the most remarkable thing about his obedience is its simplicity. Four dreams! It's easy for us to think, "Well, if God ever showed up to me in a dream I'd obey, too!" But, I'm not sure God's will was so clear for Joseph. In Joseph's day, rabbis were divided on the value of dreams. Some thought dreams were worthless and ought to be disregarded. Others said they were kind of a weak form of prophecy. Still others said it all depended on the dream; some were true and others false. The point is these dreams weren't as clear as we might think. He had the hard job of interpreting and determining the worth of the dreams.

Have you ever sensed God was telling you to do something; it seemed so clear at the time but you still had doubts? You try to check it out with the Scripture; you run it by a few friends. You pray about it. But you're still not sure you got it right. That's how it must have been for Joseph. And yet, with each word from God, Joseph simply obeys.

He does so without questioning. This must have been refreshing to the angel Gabriel. In the first two trips he made, he didn't get that kind of response. When Gabriel visited the old man Zacharias to tell him he would soon be the father of John the Baptist, he denied it was possible, saying, "I'm an old man, and my wife's well beyond her childbearing years." Even Mary had a question for Gabriel when he announced her virgin conception. But, Joseph responds without any questions. And it wasn't because he knew all the answers. He was just one those men who didn't **have** to know all the answers.

His simple obedience is remarkable in its immediacy. We never see him stalling. The night of his second dream, when God told him to take the Child and flee to Egypt, he woke Mary up, bundled up the baby, and left that very night. He didn't stall; he didn't set his alarm for 6:30 so he could be refreshed and ready to go the next day. He didn't even say good-bye to his friends; he just left.

There is something for us to learn here. We don't have to have all the answers to obey God's word. Nor should we expect to be given the luxury to obey on our own time schedule. Selective obedience isn't obedience, it's merely convenience. When God speaks to us in his Word he desires simple, unquestioning, immediate obedience.

I used to have a little dog named Mitch. He was a Cairn Terrier and if you know anything about Terriers you know how strong-willed they can be. It was my job to get Mitch in from the backyard to put him in his little kennel for the night. I'd stand at the door looking out in my backyard and begin to call, "Here Mitch." Once in a great while he'd come when I call, but most often what I got is a "head tilt." Have you ever seen a Terrier head tilt? It's like they're acting dumb, but really they're defying you.

When God speaks or calls, some of us give him a head tilt. We act like we're not sure what he means, but we know darn well what he means, and our job isn't to question but to obey. It was this kind of simple obedience that makes Joseph's life so influential.

Influential Obedience

Joseph's obedience made a difference. You've heard of the cliché, "Like father, like son." Think of this in relation to Joseph and Jesus.

Jesus was the one who taught us, really for the first time to address God as our Father. He used the word "Abba" which is an intimate but reverent form of address. No doubt it's the word Jesus first learned to use in relation to Joseph. Many today have trouble calling God their "Father" because their fathers treated them so poorly. Whatever happened in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth it had to be of such a quality that Jesus could use a label for God that he'd used for Joseph.

I've heard the most distant parent-child relationship in America is between fathers and sons. That wasn't true in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Hebrews says Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered. But I think he learned some of it from Joseph as well. I know he was the Son of God, but Joseph's simple, unquestioning obedience had to rub off on Jesus. In Joseph he'd seen a man willing to say, "Not my will but yours be done." Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, with hot sweat of blood running down his face, Jesus would echo those same words.

Obedience has a long term payoff. We may not get to see that payoff this side of heaven. Joseph never got to see his son preach a sermon or perform a miracle. He never got to see his son's message sweep across the Roman Empire and change the course of Western Civilization. Joseph died in faith, but there was a payoff. When his adopted Son was raised in glory, Joseph was the first to greet him.

In the Louvre in Paris there is a 17th century painting called St. Joseph in the Carpenter's Shop. It shows a sturdy, rugged Joseph in his shop. The only other figure there is Jesus at 10 or 11 years of age. He's holding a candle which is the only light. He's looking attentively at the graying Joseph take intractable material and shape it. In the shadows at the bottom of the picture, you can barely see what Joseph is building—a cross. I think it was in that carpenter's shop Jesus learned the obedience that led him to die on the cross for sinners like us.

Conclusion

If I could give you one word about how to be ready for Christmas this year it would be this simple word—obedience. If some of us were honest, we'd admit the one thing we're missing this Christmas is a sense of intimacy and closeness with God. We know this is supposed to be a special time with God; we know this is the celebration of God coming near to us in the person

of Christ; we know this is the time of year we remember the whole purpose of his coming, to reach out and save lost sinners and bring them into his family, but the fact is we don't feel very near to him. I want you to know today that for some of us the problem is very simple; the problem is obedience. There is an area of our lives where we're anything but Joseph-like. God has spoken and we are tilting our heads at God, waiting to see how serious he really is. For some of you the first step of obedience is simply to believe in Christ and accept him as your personal

Savior and Lord. The Bible calls that "the obedience of faith." For others, it's to stop doing something you know you should not be doing. For still others, it's starting to do something that you have been neglecting. Whatever it is, you know what it is, and you can let Joseph, this silent witness, be for you the catalyst to make it right.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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