

Text: Matthew 1.18-25  
St Stephen's

Dec 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
Christmas Eve

## A Surprise Hero on Christmas!

I want to tell you a **Christmas Story tonight** about someone who lived through the birth of Jesus. He is one of my **heroes**, but he's not a normal hero, not a super hero – he's actually kind of an **anti-hero**! He's a regular guy **named Joseph**. We know a bit about him...

**He is a good guy**, a pious Jew, a simple guy – he didn't have much, and he worked as a **carpenter**

**He was a quiet man**; even though he appears in several chapters of the Bible, he never says a single word. I told Becca that and she said, "What did you expect? He's a man...!"

**He was engaged** to a young girl named Mary. This would be an **arranged marriage**, like most of the marriages of their time. **Engagement** in their days would last about a year, and could only be broken by **death or divorce**. It was a year of planning and celebration and preparation. They were called **husband and wife** during that time, but they would not live together or have **sexual relations** until after the wedding.

**He was in trouble**, because Mary is **pregnant**... That is when the **drama** starts. Joseph is not the father. That is clear. She's got another lover, Joseph is sure. He **wakes in the morning** and it's a bad dream that won't go away. But it is no dream; **it is a fact**. Joseph is overwhelmed with anger, and rage, and jealousy.

The Bible tells us that he is **afraid**. He is..

- afraid she has been **unfaithful**,
- afraid of **what people will say**,
- afraid he could **never trust her** again,
- afraid young **dream has crashed**. He's

- afraid probably for her **sanity**. He doesn't believe her story at all. Still a virgin?? God did this, supernaturally?? **Joseph doesn't buy it**. Hard to blame him. And he's
- afraid **for her** because he **still loves her**. So he's afraid for **what will happen to her** – the gossip and shame, a loss of all her friends, an abrupt end to her engagement, and if things turned Taliban-like, even a possible stoning.

Joseph is **a broken man**; he is bruised and humiliated and baffled and shamed. This whole thing is way beyond his ability to fix. Just as the drama is ready to come to a heartbreaking end, Matthew tells us that...

### **God Meets Joseph**

*an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*

Matthew 1.20

Someone once told me that God always has the **same address**, "You can find him at the end of your rope". That's where Joseph was. In the place where we think it is all over, a **door opens** to God. In the place where we give up hope, we find hope. In the place where we are overwhelmed by fear, God meets us.

Joseph was not the first one to find out that **you have to come to the end of yourself to find yourself**. He was not the first one to find out that a **marital crisis** or a **family emergency** was the occasion God used to bring him to the end of you and the start of something quite remarkable. His own boy, soon to be born, would say something just like that, something about dying to live. He said,

*'If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it'*

Matt 10.39

Joseph is rocked by his encounter with the angel. No one **stands before an archangel** and thinks, 'Wow, this is cool!' You don't. Your

knees buckle and your heart races, and you know you are in over your head. And when you stand before God, and you know it is God (and you **know** when it is God) and he says 'Do not be afraid', your fear melts, and you head bows and you know that something impossible is happening.

Matthew records Joseph's response in simple and brief words:

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*

Matthew 1.24

**Joseph yields his life - and his life turns.** His life becomes a 'yes' to God. Sometimes you can **say 'yes'** to someone **to blow them off**. Do you know what I mean? You say 'yes' to what you have been asked just to get them off your back – and then you don't follow through, you don't do anything about it. That is not faith or repentance or trust or surrender. It is just a deceptive way of **keeping you in charge**. Joseph did something different here. This is a 'yes' followed by **immediate action**. He quickly goes and does what the angel bids him to do. He takes Mary home as his wife. Mary has a husband, his special son has an earthly Dad, and his marriage is restored. That's why **Joseph is one of my heroes...**

God does something else in Joseph, **He stretches him...**

## **God Stretches Joseph**

The angel said to Joseph...

*'what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'* Matt 1.20

Joseph would spend the rest of his own days **pondering what that meant**, who this child really was. Some **12 years later** Joseph gets **another hint**. Sometime that year Joseph and Mary and Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the great festivals. In the caravan on the way home they discovered that **Jesus was missing**. They frantically searched and then go back to Jerusalem to find him. After several frightening days they locate him **in the temple**, talking with the teachers! He gave them **this simple explanation**,

*"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"*

Luke 2.48-51

Joseph again wonders: **'Who is this child?** I have raised him as my own, but he's not mine. Whose son is he?'

Over the years ahead, it would **unfold, slowly, astonishingly**. The child Mary carried was **her own son**, and **God's own son**; fully man, fully God.

People wonder **how could someone be God and man** at the same time? This has troubled people through the centuries. There are some **13 different ways of getting it wrong**, and they all have long complicated names: arianism, gnosticism, docetism, sabellianism, apollianarianism, Manichaeism. We will have a **quiz** later! These things need to be thought about and understood, but here is the fact that stands out.

*'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'* Or, as we confess in our Creed tonight, *'True God of true God, Who for us and for our salvation... came down from heaven and was made man.'* The uncreated God, more specifically the uncreated Son of God, took on human nature and stepped into this world, **in person**.

*'God with us'*, we call him. Immanuel! The Jews worshipped **"God-above-us"**, the holy, unapproachable, almighty, "you-cannot-stand-in-my-presence-and-live" creator God. **Islam** believes that Allah is above all the unapproachable, untouchable God. Your only option is to **submit** to him. He would **never enter human life or history**, that would defile him; He is too great, too holy, to walk the dirty streets of our neighborhoods.

But the Bible says it happened precisely **because God is so great** – not only great **in holiness** but also great **in mercy**: too great to give up on us, too great to leave us to ourselves... so **the great God stoops** and he humbles himself and he comes. In person. He arrives in a manger.

And that means something profound; it means that **fallen human nature** and **human failure** need no longer **be the last word** on any life. **Because the Son of God has come.**

Never again would a broken relationship, or a crushing loneliness, or an overwhelming temptation or a haunting emptiness have to be **the defining theme** of a human life. **Because the Son of God has come.**

And he is doing something remarkable in the world, something so wonderful that you just **want to get in on it. And he says you can.** No matter who you are or where you have been or what you have done.

Joseph is one of my heroes because this quiet, humble dad made room for this impossible arrival, **this Son who was so much more** than his son. Over and over again he would say, 'yes' to this little child, 'welcome' to this young boy.

## **God Shapes Joseph**

Our Christmas story today is about how God stepped into the life of a quiet, humble man. Before Mary's pregnancy, Joseph no doubt had his plans, his hopes, his desires. We all do. But this baby changed everything. He always does. **He changed the shape of Joseph's life.**

Joseph from that day on found his life interrupted, rearranged, and even threatened. He discovered that his wife and then his son had **a greater love for God** than they did for him. He took **cold showers** for nine months so that this baby could be born of a virgin. He took upon himself **the shame and the blame** that was gossiped about his wife and gave himself to **guard her dignity and honor.**

He would make **difficult and dangerous journeys**, first to Bethlehem where Jesus would be born and then hundreds of miles into Egypt to protect Jesus and Mary for a two year period from a crazed King Herod. He became a **fugitive** of the law and a **refugee** in a foreign land. His **reputation** was damaged from the start of his marriage, and his **career**

was repeatedly interrupted. For all the years of their marriage, they **lived hand to mouth**, having enough for the day, but rarely enough for the days to come.

**Joseph's life became an offering, a gift, a sacrifice; he poured himself out. He gave himself for the sake of God's work in others**, starting with those closest to him.

Joseph is a hero because he teaches that **the real measure of your life** is not the money that you earn, or the business that you build, or the ladders that you climb, or the applause you receive. All **these things come and quickly go**. They last for just a moment and they **never satisfy**.

A much more important measure of life is the way we give ourselves to those around us for the sake of God's work in them. The measure of life is **not what we get**, but **what we give**. **Mother Theresa**; *'There are no great things but only little things done with great love. Happy are those!* Joseph would have understood her words.

**After Jesus' 12<sup>th</sup> year** Joseph, this quiet, humble man, passes from view. He is not listed among histories' top movers and shakers. But he was arguably a man who changed his world more than most - because **he dared to give his life for the sake of God's work in other people**.

I have told you the story of Joseph, tonight, and invited you to become more like him. But how can that happen to people like us? Well – the **same way it happened to Joseph**. He made room for this child. He welcomed him. Yielded to him.

From the cradle in Bethlehem **a little hand reaches to you** tonight - It is the hand of the **Son of God**. If you take his hand, you will quickly find that little hand is **stronger** than any force you will ever have to face. Will you take his hand tonight?

**A little hand** reaches out to you tonight. It is the hand of a special baby, the hand of **Immanuel, God-with-us**. If you take his hand, he will stand with you, **stick by you** even when no one else will. Will you take his hand tonight?

And that little hand – look at it carefully, and you will see that it has a **nail wound** in it. It is the hand of someone who has **poured himself out** for you to lift your shame and heal your guilt. Because that is the shape of his life, it is the shape of his love – and if you take his hand, **his life will shape your life**. He will **free you** to make **your life an offering**, a gift, **poured out** for him, **released** to serve others. This is the little baby who grew up and said...

*'If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it'*

Matt 10.39

Will you take his hand tonight?