

What About Joseph?
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Most ministers, and I am no exception, have a love/hate relationship with preaching. We love standing up and preaching, of reaching for those words that just might make a difference in someone's life, including our own. But the process of putting those words together, of sifting through, these days, thanks to the internet, millions of facts and possible stories and coming up with something relevant and concise, is often daunting work. And there is the reality, the sometimes overwhelming reality, that when one is a preacher, all of life – every newspaper article, every television show, every embarrassing family story – becomes future sermon fodder.

Now you might be wondering what all this has to do about Joseph. Well once in awhile in the process of conceiving and giving birth to a sermon – get the Joseph connection? – something surprising happens. Once in awhile I have, in keeping with the Christmas theme today, a bit of an epiphany and discover something I never intended to discover. That's what happened to me with today's sermon, in part thanks to my colleague, Scott Alexander's sermon, *Joseph the Fool*.

I will get to my epiphany a little later. First let's talk about Joseph and his role in the Christmas story. Scott Alexander begins his sermon with these words that capture what I want to say about Joseph and the Christmas story this morning:

"When the Christmas story is usually told, Joseph is little more than mentioned in passing. But I want to delve into the story of Joseph (the one who was called the father of Jesus) because I believe that lying nestled quietly in his curious and often neglected tale is perhaps *the most essential spiritual message* December has to teach us.

I want to make one thing perfectly clear. By interpreting the old nativity story in my admittedly unorthodox way, I do not intend any disrespect or insult to the more traditional beliefs of others. I simply offer you my heartfelt interpretation of what happened to and through Joseph, by way of trying to arrive at a Christmas meaning that might enrich and enliven us as Unitarian Universalists."

I share Scott's disclaimer with you because I know that some of us have issues with the Christmas story and some might have issues with my interpretation of Joseph's role in the story as well. Especially when I tell you that when I first thought of today's sermon my working subtitle for today's sermon was "How Joseph Got Screwed."

That subtitle tells you what I have long thought of Joseph's role in the story of Jesus' birth. Joseph has always been a bit character in the story, someone who is known far more for leading the donkey and Mary into Bethlehem, than

he ever was for being an important part of Jesus' life. There is not one quote from Joseph in the Bible and for most of the last 2,000 years Joseph wasn't even important to the church's teachings about Jesus and his life. He was not made a saint until the 19th century; and how many of us have a clear picture of what artists imagine he even looked like. A problem none of us have when it comes to Mary or Jesus.

The Christmas story, like all the Biblical stories, can be problematic for us Unitarian Universalists. In large part because we often get hung up on not finding value in the stories unless they meet our standards for reason and logic. And the Christmas story about a virgin birth is too much for most of us to swallow. Which is why Leslie Weatherhead's words from our reading this morning are so helpful. Virgin – as most words in the Bible – did not mean then what it does today. I love the Christmas story but I believe God is as much Jesus' father as God is my father and your father. I resonate with the Jewish perspective from Biblical times that the birth of every child had three partners, the father, the mother and the spirit of God. That divine love and mystery that lives in every one of us. Speaking about the Christmas story Bishop John Shelby Spong writes "No recognized New Testament scholar, Catholic or Protestant, would today seriously defend the historicity of these narratives. This does not mean that the birth stories are not loved, valued or even seen as valid proclamations of the gospel. It does mean however they are not to be taken literally."

Sometimes we Unitarian Universalists lose the richness of Biblical wisdom because we take it too literally and miss out on the deeper meanings the stories can teach us. For many years I rejected most of the Bible because I could not see past my personal, rational blinders to appreciate the life lessons it has to teach. I was reminded of how my blinders can get in my way when I was at a clergy spiritual retreat last year. I was the only non-Christian at the retreat and I was uncomfortable about that for about the first two hours. I soon discovered that although my Christian colleagues and I sometimes had different language about the spiritual yearnings and hopes we shared, we had far more in common. One of the meditation practices I was reluctant to embrace was sitting with Christian icons. Praying and meditating with pictures of Christian saints has been a meaningful spiritual practice of Christians for hundreds of years but I did not think I could find any value in it because I am not a Christian.

On the last day of the retreat I decided to confront my fears, and to be honest my arrogance, by sitting in silent meditation with a beautiful depiction of Mary and the baby Jesus. I imagined what I shared in common with Mary and with Jesus. To my surprise I found there was a lot I shared with both of them: unconditional love and hope for my children and all children with Mary, and a childlike sense of wonder and innocence with Jesus. On the way home from the retreat I bought an icon of my favorite saint, St. Francis, and it sits on my office desk where I sometimes use it to aid my devotional practices.

I share this story with you because it reminds me of the invitation the Christmas story offers us each year. A chance to go past our comfort zone, our fears, prejudices and biases and sit with its characters looking for commonality and new spiritual wisdom that can enrich our lives. When it comes to Joseph I brought some prejudices and biases with me as you might have guessed when I shared what the subtitle of today's sermon was going to be.

My biggest bias is that I am a stepfather and depending on who you listen to Joseph is considered either Jesus' stepfather or foster father. I have always looked at Joseph as Jesus' stepfather, especially since I became a stepfather over twenty years ago.

When I met my wife Kathleen in 1984 I found her to be funny, attractive, and intelligent. Those were all good things but what helped me fall in love with her as much, if not more, as those attributes was that she was a single mother with a cute-as-can-be three year old. I was raised, most of my childhood, by a single mother and I have a high respect for any woman who is raising children on her own. Justin, Kathleen's son, went to the movies with us on our second date, I played Frisbee with him in his backyard that night and it wasn't long before he walked down the aisle to bring us our rings on our wedding day.

Part of me, and I hate to admit this, thought that I was the white knight riding in on the horse to rescue Justin from a life without a dad when I became his stepfather. Twenty plus years later I can tell you that the fantasy I had about being a stepfather, of helping to raise another man's son, was nothing like the reality. Being a stepparent is hard, sometimes thankless work. For all the joys of being a stepparent, for all the love that I discovered I did not know I had, there have been many heartaches and struggles as well. This is true of

any type of parenting but there is a special type of challenge in hearing words like *"you're not my real dad!"* too often.

Which is why, I suppose, I have always felt a kinship with Joseph, and why I have thought that he has gotten the short straw, so to speak, in Christmas story notoriety. But Joseph's challenges, and his responses to them, were far more than I ever had to deal with and far more than I suspect most of us would have accepted.

Only two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, tell us about Jesus' birth. Luke tells the story from Mary's perspective and Matthew tells it from Joseph's. Imagine what it must have been like for Joseph, a righteous, hard working Jewish man who was betrothed, or what we call engaged, to Mary when she came and told him she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph didn't believe that for one minute. Who would? Imagine the rage he must have felt, the shame and embarrassment he must have felt.

Joseph being a good man decides he will quietly divorce Mary to avoid scandal and protect her as much as he can. I doubt I would have been as gracious as he was. I can only imagine how I would have felt if the woman I loved came to me and told me that she was carrying another man's baby.

As Matthew tells the story Joseph has a dream and an angel tells him it is okay for Joseph to take Mary because the baby's father is God. Joseph does what he is told. He brings Mary to Bethlehem and is beside her for Jesus' birth. Later he moves his family to Egypt to escape King Herod. After Herod dies he moves his family to Nazereth. And the last we hear about Joseph is when he takes the 12 year old Jesus to Jerusalem during Passover and loses him for three days only to later find him in the temple. I can only imagine the fight that must have caused!

That is what the Bible tells us happened. The writers of Luke and Matthew are making the case that Jesus is the messiah promised in Hebrew Scriptures so they make sure that Joseph has royal ancestors and that Jesus has a godly father – as was the custom for any stories in those days about extraordinary people.

Here's what I believe to be true about the story. Mary and Joseph were engaged and Mary got pregnant by another man, not God. I admit I am biased on this point. For me, if God is Jesus' father, and Jesus is really God, most – if not all - of the meaning of Jesus' life goes away. What I love and

treasure about Jesus and his life is that he was a human being just like you and me. Because I think of him this way I am inspired to do my best to live the way he did. I fall short most of the time but his teachings and example are something that I have access to and might be able to emulate.

If Jesus is God his ability to radically love everyone, his commitment to live a spiritually centered life, to fight against injustice and embrace those who are different does not mean much because Gods can do anything they want to do. Not us mortals. So I admit that I want, I need, Jesus to be every much a human as you and me.

So Mary is pregnant by another man and Joseph does what almost any man would do. And then he is visited by an angel who tells him that Mary's baby comes from God. All of us dream, even if some of us cannot remember those dreams, but most of us dismiss the stories about God's angels visiting. Dreams are a big part of the Christmas story, of all the Bible, especially dreams when angels from God come a calling. Scott Alexander's description of Joseph's dream opens the story about Joseph up to all of us – even those of us who don't think God was Mary's lover and who are not sure that angels make house calls.

Scott writes: "I must tell you that I do not believe in angels – at least not the heavenly kind. But this is not to say I don't believe that Joseph heard something high and holy that night. I have always taken this part of the ancient nativity story to mean that, deep in that night of anger and outrage, Joseph's largest and loveliest heart spoke to him, he listened to his most generous impulses, and that enabled him to find the compassion and understanding to forgive Mary and continue his commitment to her. The angel of the night is a beautiful metaphor for the noble human process of Joseph listening to his own best heart, and finding forgiveness and understanding rather than condemnation and rejection. This is the kind of holy visitation I believe in."

When I read Scott's interpretation of Joseph's dream I had my epiphany about Joseph. He wasn't a disrespected stepfather who toiled in the relative anonymity of helping to raise a childhood prodigy with a beautiful, famous and innocent rock star type of wife. He was the best example of what can happen to all of us at Christmas and on every day of the year.

How many of us have been visited in the night by dreams, often nightmares, of what we have done wrong in our lives? How often does the anger, the frustrations, the injustices, the mistakes we visit on others come back to us at night in the form of despair, disillusionment and doubt? How many nights do we give away sleep to regrets over something we said, something we did that was not our best selves and hurt another person? And how many of us wake up and do what Joseph decided to do?

I imagine Joseph returning to Mary, perhaps in tears, telling her how sorry he was for considering divorcing her, taking her in his arms and promising he will love her and her unborn child with all of his heart. Perhaps this is the miracle of the Christmas story that each one of us, no matter what our religious tradition of choice, can best relate to and hope to replicate.

This Christmas, as with every Christmas, is a chance for us to see life with new and shining eyes, not only because of all the children and the wonder and joy they share, but because each of us are invited to look again at the sacred stories of the season and find ourselves. Maybe we need to sit with Joseph or Mary or the baby Jesus to learn new insights on how to live our lives. Maybe it's Ebenezer Scrooge, Charlie Brown, George Bailey, or even the returning Sun who will be our teacher.

Whatever story and which ever character brings new meaning, new lessons about love and the magic that is this season and is life, I invite you to let them in. Epiphanies do come easier this time of year.

Scott Alexander called Joseph a fool because he chose to live his life in a way that many of us would consider to be foolish – marrying an adulteress and raising another man's child. I leave you with his words, his invitation, for how all of us can be fools this time of year.

"The good news this December is that you too are free to go the way of God's foolish ones --to live a life ever more moved by inclusive, reckless, foolish love. This holiday season (maybe even the whole year round) be *a fool like Joseph*. Whenever and however you can: forgive the unforgivable, embrace the unembracable, love the unlovable, give gifts when you will not get anything in return, find compassion for those toward whom you have only felt indifference. So *be a fool like Joseph*: take a hot casserole to that reclusive neighbor who lives alone in that ramshackle house around the corner. Be *a fool like Joseph*: go spend the afternoon with your long-lost cousin who is dying of A.I.D.S. alone

in the city. *Be a fool like Joseph:* send that contribution, for a little more than you can afford, to that African famine relief agency. *Be a fool like Joseph:* donate a morning each week to help cook in the local soup kitchen.

Be a fool like Joseph: go to that brother or daughter or uncle from whom you have been so bitterly estranged all these years and refuse to leave (refuse to leave, by God) until you have achieved reconciliation. *Be a fool like Joseph:* don't ignore that awkward soul you encounter who only wants a few moments of conversation and simple human affirmation.

Be a fool like Joseph: open your heart to that one person in your life right now (you know who that is) and let flow the healing power of your love.

Be a fool like Joseph."

Merry Christmas! May it be so. Amen.