

Christmas 2, Year A, Jan. 2, 2011
All Saints Episcopal Church, Mobile
Jayne Carson

Today's reading is the end of the birth narrative in Matthew. Imagine if we had only the Matthew version on which to base our Christmas pageants. We certainly would not need as many actors. No shepherds, no heavenly host. No manger - so no cattle or sheep or camels. Mary is barely mentioned. Only one angel appears to Joseph, and that is in a dream. Other than the flight to Egypt, there is not a lot of action. How different it is from the Lukan version. In Luke's gospel, Joseph is barely mentioned. Unfortunately in the popular tradition, Joseph is often lost. But, in Matthew's gospel, the men are the main characters – Joseph, Herod and the Wise Men.

The most significant character is Joseph. What does the Gospel of Matthew really tell us about Joseph? Joseph is the one who receives visitations from an angel – four times in fact. He was compassionate – he was concerned about Mary even though the child she carried was not his. Joseph is decisive and takes action. We know that he was a “righteous man.” He kept the Law. When God spoke to him, he obeyed – all four times. He left behind possessions, family and friends to obey God. He successfully kept his family safe even through the treacherous 200 mile journey to Egypt and back. He was a skilled worker, a *teknon*, traditionally translated as *carpenter*, but could just as easily have been a stone mason or a metal worker. He would have been able to support a family. No wonder he is the patron of unborn children, fathers, immigrants, workers and is invoked against doubt and hesitation.

The second significant character is that of Herod. He, on the other hand, is not so admirable. Although he was called Herod the Great, he bribed and connived his way to the throne of Judea. He was never secure as King of the Jews. After all, he was not really considered a Jew since his mother was not Jewish and he came from Imudea. He bribed his enemies or had them executed. He even had two of his own sons and his favorite wife executed when he thought they were plotting against him. The Romans had a saying about Herod – it was better to be Herod's pig than to be his son. Our gospel reading today skipped over the slaughter of the innocents story, but Herod was not beyond doing something that vicious and evil to keep his throne.

Looking at it this way, I am struck by how different the childhood of the Christ child would have been, had he been born into the ruling house of Judea rather than the household of a righteous man. We do not know much about Jesus' childhood – none of the gospel writers included much information about it. There are some stories in the non-canonical writings, but those are suspect. But we can make some assumptions based on the man that the child would become. Joseph did something that Herod could not do – he created a safe place for the child Jesus to thrive.

I like the idea that the Messiah grew up surrounded by family with the freedom to run and play with other children – to *just* be a child. It is true that the child is the father of the man. Those first six years of a child's life are the foundation of resilience and character. So Jesus must have had role models that taught him how to listen and how to be compassionate. How to lead. How to serve God. He knew how to relate to all kinds of people including Gentiles, religious leaders, women and even children. Jesus could never have gotten those skills in Herod's household. He would have been isolated from the people of Judea, assuming he would have survived the machinations of the court. And, Herod was certainly not a righteous man. Considering that households of the time were structurally very patriarchal, it is reasonable to assume that Joseph was a significant influence.

Because there is so little information about Joseph, many legends have sprouted about him as well as about the entire nativity story. I really noticed it this Advent and Christmas for some reason. My family was very tired of hearing me say “that is not in the Bible, is it?” or “where in heaven's name did that come from?” One legend is that Joseph was 90 years old at the time of his marriage to Mary. Considering that the life span at that time was about 32, I have my doubts. Another is an elaborate story complete with names that he was a widower and had children from his previous marriage – thereby explaining Jesus' brothers and sisters while maintaining Mary's perpetual virginity. Many of these stories portray Joseph and Mary as being extremely poor, but they were probably no more so than their neighbors.

Since Joseph does not appear in Jesus' public life, at his death, or resurrection, many historians believe Joseph probably had died before

Jesus entered public ministry. There is even one legend that has him dying with Jesus and Mary at his side. It could be true, but I think that if those details were important to the message, the gospel writer would have included them.

So what we do know from the gospel is that:

- Joseph was a compassionate, caring man.
- Joseph was man of faith, obedient to whatever God asked of him without knowing why or what the outcome would be.
- Joseph loved Jesus. His one concern was for the safety of this child entrusted to him by God.
- Joseph respected God.

So what is the gospel writer saying to us as Christians in today's world? What is Joseph modeling for us? Can we be as unquestioningly obedient and trusting of God's commands as Joseph?

- What people or situations in our world need the compassion and caring of Joseph?
- What has God entrusted to our care that needs the protection that Joseph gave to the Christ child and his mother?
- Where can you be Joseph to the Christ Child that lives in each of our hearts?

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. Lk 2.52