

**Fourth Sunday, December 22, 2013**  
**Advent 4 - Year A**  
**Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

One of our two primary Biblical companions on our Advent journey each year is John the Baptist who, more through his *denunciation*, helped prepare the way of the Lord and point out God's presence and purpose in peoples' lives. The other primary Advent companion is Mary, who, through God's *annunciation* and her Yes to God, received and accepted her call to be the God-bearer, the Mother of our Lord. Well, we've seen John the Baptist in our readings over the past few weeks. And so today we're supposed to focus on Mary, so that we can get to Christmas, right?

But wait! Today we don't really meet Mary straight on, because this year we are reading Matthew's gospel; and in that version Mary has no memorable lines, and is not the central figure in the story. In fact, in Matthew's gospel God's annunciation of Jesus' birth comes to Joseph!

A few years ago a former colleague of mine started a sermon on the Fourth Sunday of Advent by mentioning a book written by *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd entitled *Are Men Necessary?* and then my friend stated that "in the annunciation story, the answer to the question *Are Men Necessary?* is 'No.'" In some families, of course, that is true. Yet, with all due respect to Mary, if we look at our gospel reading from Matthew, we can hear three reasons why it is important to have Joseph both as a crucial part of this story and this holy family, rather than just forcing him to the sidelines as he is portrayed in Luke's gospel and in much of Christian theology, art and legend through the centuries.

The first reason Joseph is important is the obviously human one—Mary wasn't the only one baffled by this astounding news. Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, upon hearing that she was pregnant, knew he didn't have anything to do with this! The point here is how Joseph—although utterly perplexed—handled this situation. Even though the laws<sup>i</sup> and customs of his day would have allowed him to do so, and even before he is visited by the angel in a dream, Joseph knew in his heart that he "was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." That could have taken the form of putting Mary on public trial on charges of adultery. Instead he seemed resolved to "dismiss her quietly." Joseph, an ordinary man of his time, was living through the most perplexing moment of his life, decently. But then he got a message in a dream—the equivalent of the annunciation that Mary received in Luke's gospel. In the angel's annunciation and Joseph's response, we see Joseph overcoming his perplexity and fear and living into his calling to take Mary as his wife and her child as his son—taking on responsibility even where his society and his religious obligations would have absolved him of such responsibility. His was a journey into a deeper humanity. As myself the son of a runaway father, I have long looked at Joseph as the model, the example, of responsibility as husband and father.

Now, within the angel's annunciation to Joseph we see a second reason why Joseph has a central role. The angel in the dream calls Joseph "son of David." Son of David—that title is very important. Today's first reading and all the prophecies about the coming Messiah, the Christ, foretold that he would be born the Son of David, that is, from the house or lineage of King David, and would lead God's people to become the beacons of justice and peace that they were originally chosen to be when God made covenant with David some thousand years earlier. If this was to be fulfilled, then Joseph was the man to whom this child must be born. Then Mary would have a husband and her child would be born the Son of David in the lineage extending back to King David; for in those days the child of a household was given legal status through the father and the father's family. And so, it isn't just Mary who gives birth to this remarkable child even though the child conceived in her is not precisely from Joseph. According to the angel's message it's both parents that were needed to give birth—Mary to give the child its life, and Joseph to give him his name—Jesus, Son of David.

Finally, the third reason why Joseph is necessary and important is because again of that lineage of his—but not just the King David part. Just before our passage from Matthew, there is a lengthy genealogy of Jesus going back no less than 42 generations, through Joseph to King David, and even further back all the way to the father of the faith—Abraham—the father not only of Judaism, but also of what would become Christianity, and later, Islam. And here's the point—as much as Luke's gospel stresses the centrality of Mary and the totally unique quality of the virgin birth, Matthew's gospel, on the other hand, puts the birth of Jesus in the context of being another strange holy irregularity in the long lineage through Joseph on back. This genealogy of Jesus through Joseph, in fact, contains some amazing irregularities through whom the line of David came to be, including, for example, Tamar the widow who dressed as a cult prostitute and seduced her father-in-law in order to continue the next generation in what would be the direct line leading to the birth of King David. There's Rahab the prostitute, and Ruth the Moabite, the Gentile, the foreigner. And then there's Bathsheba, who, because of David's murder of her husband (Uriah the Hittite), and because of David's adulterous behavior, bore David a son, named Solomon. And the line continues. So for Matthew, in putting Joseph on center stage, the virgin birth, though astounding, is not seen as an absolutely unique event, but rather as a part of the continuity of the rather irregular genealogy of the Messianic line of David which included prostitutes, adulterers, even murderers, as well as foreigners and other scandalous ancestors—born, adopted, married, and otherwise grafted into this family tree.

The point of all this is that the message of the birth of Jesus born of Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit, yet claimed by Joseph as his son in the lineage of David his ancestor, is thus not so unique or discontinuous from the scandalous irregularities of the past. Therefore, the birth of this Divine One doesn't eradicate or supersede or triumphantly trump the very humanity that God was taking on in all the diversity and irregularity that is our human past. As one Jewish writer put it plainly, "When God created the first humans, he did so from the dust of the four corners of the earth, so that no nation may say 'our ancestors preceded yours.'" So also with the birth of this child, this Son of David. The God who was present with God's people all along—and that includes all

humankind—took on flesh and blood in the person of Jesus, Son of David. And that God-with-us—in Hebrew, “Emmanuel”—although a unique reality in Jesus, was, in fact, in continuity with God’s being and God’s purposes in relationship with all that had gone on before. And so, given that Jesus’ lineage had several quite notable Gentile or non-Jewish direct ancestors, Matthew makes the point with Joseph and his genealogy that this Jesus event holds not only a continuity with the historic faith of the people of Israel, but it is also good news for all people whose lineage is also brought to this birth and into this holy family. That is also why Matthew is the gospel writer who tells the story of the three wise men—three foreigners—who come to pay homage to the infant Jesus and who were the first to share this news outside the Jewish world.

So our Gospel, with Joseph center stage, alongside Mary, is telling us that divine redemption is one long story that began at the beginning, involving all types of people from all backgrounds, and continued through the birth of Jesus the Christ of God who as the Risen One still calls us and all humanity to join him in his ongoing mission of repairing the world and restoring all to right relationship. It is a mission that will only be complete when God is all in all. And since it is Christ who will bring all to a completion, not Christianity—no church or any other religious institution or tradition can claim to be the *sole* vehicle to live out Christ’s ongoing mission.

Today’s gospel is a story about Joseph, the one who in the midst of a most perplexing and disturbing situation beyond his control, surely was tempted to walk away from it all to live a proper conventional life. Instead he found in it God’s presence and purpose. This led him to a deeper and fuller expression of his humanity and took him beyond the conventions and customs of his day. It’s about a man who was not only empowered to believe the impossible, but to give it his name, thus joining a very human lineage of a number of irregular ancestors who, as we now know, all have a common ancestor deep in the pre-history of Africa—ancestors who went out on many paths to many lands. And in bringing his own ancestral line to this story and making his own yes to God and to Mary and to their son, Joseph brings all of us into the heart of the Christmas story, as well.

May you have a blessed Christmas.  
Amen

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to Krister Stendahl and Barbara Brown Taylor for some of the ideas in this sermon. See Barbara Brown Taylor, [Gospel Medicine](#) (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), pp. 154-157.

<sup>i</sup> e.g. Deuteronomy 22:13-30