

**The Rev. Thomas M. Murphy**  
**St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD**  
**December 18, 2022**

**Year A: The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

**Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18**

**Romans 1:1-7**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**Joseph the Craftsman**

Over the past couple of Sundays, we've been reintroduced to two of the central characters of Advent: John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary.

And now today, on the fourth and final Sunday of the season, we turn our attention to one last Advent character, the one who is most often overlooked and sometimes nearly forgotten: Joseph.

A big reason why Joseph is frequently neglected is that, although he plays an essential role in Jesus' birth and early years, he does not say a single word in the gospels.

At least one person has described Joseph as "the Silent Man of Advent."

Most of what we know about Joseph comes from the Gospel of Matthew.

Joseph is described as a descendant of King David, which sounds impressive, but, after so many centuries, the family's wealth and power was long gone.

Joseph was engaged – or betrothed – to Mary.

Now, in our society today, an engagement is certainly a big deal – in fact, as you know, for some couples, the engagement party has become quite fancy and elaborate and expensive – but, despite all the hoopla, engagements are really just

spoken promises between two people that can be broken relatively easily, though usually not without awkwardness, disappointment, and pain.

But things were different in the world of Joseph and Mary.

Engagements were arranged by families, and were nearly as binding as marriage itself. One needed a very good reason to break off an engagement.

Like, say, for example, your fiancée announces she's pregnant and you know that you are not the father.

Even in our own much more laid back time, this situation would be humiliating, heartbreaking and potentially explosive. But for Joseph, well, I'm not sure that we can quite describe how this shocking news must have sent him reeling.

The people of Joseph's time, and many people of our own time, would certainly understand if Joseph lashed out at Mary, if he publicly humiliated her, and left her in disgust and disgrace – a shame that would have stained not just Mary but her family, as well.

But, from the start, righteous Joseph chooses to simply “dismiss her quietly,” or at least as quietly as he could in a small town.

But God was not done with Joseph.

After an angel appeared to him in a dream, telling him that the unborn child is from the Holy Spirit and that this child was the long awaited savior, Joseph wakes up and, rather than just shaking it off as just a weird dream as we probably would, rather than thinking “you know, that was a really interesting dream but I'm still done with Mary,” instead of that, Joseph changes the course of his life – and the lives of Mary and Jesus – he changes the course of all of our lives – by swallowing his

pride, by choosing to believe, and by remaining at Mary's side and guarding her child.

Let's not underestimate the cost of Joseph's decision– the very high cost of Joseph's faithfulness.

Yes, we all know the dramatic events that are about to unfold, the journey to Bethlehem and Jesus' birth in totally inadequate circumstances, far from Mary's people, far from the women who would have midwifed the Son of God into the world.

We know how Joseph and Mary and Jesus will be forced to flee into Egypt, on the run from King Herod, who was determined to kill the newborn king.

We know all those soon-to-occur big and definitely costly events.

But, actually, I'm thinking more about everyday life back in Nazareth, the years of Jesus' childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood – the years we know almost nothing about.

What must that have been like for Joseph?

The people of small town Nazareth would have known that there was something, let's say "irregular," about Jesus' paternity. There would have been plenty of rumors and much speculation about the boy's "real father." Maybe there would have been some grudging admiration for Joseph's righteousness, I guess, but also more than a little snickering and eye rolling and winking, I bet.

That all must have been hard for Mary and for young Jesus, but it must have been particularly difficult Joseph.

So, let's not underestimate the cost of Joseph's silent decision– the very high cost of Joseph's quiet faithfulness.

One of the things that most people know about Joseph is that he was a carpenter.

But, as is often the case, the truth turns out to be a little more complicated.

The Greek word we usually translate as “carpenter” – *tekton* – is probably better translated as “craftsman” – someone who worked with wood, yes, but also other materials like metal and stone.

Joseph the craftsman.

Over the last few days, I've sat with the image of Joseph the craftsman, a man who could take wood and metal and stone and shape them into objects that were sturdy, useful, and maybe even beautiful.

And, as I thought about Joseph in his shop, quietly carving and chiseling, I realized that Joseph was not only a craftsman with wood and stone but he was also the craftsman of his own life.

It would have been easy for Joseph to allow himself to simply be shaped by fear or anger or resentment or embarrassment.

It would have been understandable if Joseph allowed his life to be nailed down by the expectations of his time and place.

But, instead, with God's help, Joseph crafted his own life - crafted a life of great faithfulness, extraordinary courage, and profound generosity.

You know, at first glance, Joseph seems like a very conventional person – a hardworking husband and dad who doesn't say much – we know the type - but, in fact, he's one of the most unusual and radical figures in the Bible.

Joseph the craftsman.

And Joseph's life is a reminder that it is possible for all of us to craft our own lives – to craft our own lives to God's glory and in loving service to God's people.

Yes, there are many aspects of life we have little or no control over, like genetics for example.

Especially after coming here where I think we have a larger than average percentage of tall people, I would love to be a little taller – not a lot – I'd take two additional inches.

But, no matter our situations – no matter our height or our families or our economics or our age or even our health, God gives us the freedom – invites us – to craft our own lives.

Like Joseph we have the power to craft how we'll respond when the unexpected happens, when our hearts are broken, when we can't see the road ahead of us.

Some of our crafting happens alone in our own "shops" when we're being prayerful and mindful, but much of our crafting happens when we are together, just like how Joseph and Mary and Jesus together crafted what we call the "Holy Family" which, when you stop and think about it, was the most non-traditional family of all time.

One of the most beautiful parts of being church is that we get to craft our lives together, choosing to uphold those who are struggling, overcoming fear to open our door to strangers from near and far, taking on new work that we've never done before and aren't totally sure that we're up to, digging deep inside our hearts and our wallets to be even more generous than we thought possible.

Joseph was a craftsman of wood and stone but, more important, with God's help, he crafted a beautiful life of love and faithfulness and generosity.

May Joseph be an inspiration for us as we continue to craft our lives, together.

Amen.