

THE FORGOTTEN WITNESS

MATTHEW 1:18-25

When I was growing up, my parents subscribed to “Readers’ Digest” magazine. This was an essential and absolutely necessary part of bathroom décor in the Breusch home. For several years, “Readers’ Digest” had a regular monthly feature article entitled “My Most Unforgettable Character.” Each month a different person described an individual who had made an unforgettable impact on his or her life in some way. These unforgettable people were usually outstanding, dynamic, charismatic or extraordinary men and women who had unique gifts or abilities that made them memorable to others.

The stories in the Bible surrounding the birth of Jesus are full of unforgettable characters: the humble shepherds, the mysterious wise men, and – perhaps most unforgettable of all – the teenage girl named Mary who became Jesus’ mother. But one character seems to get very little attention. He stands on the sidelines in these stories of Jesus’ birth. Who is that? Joseph. Joseph has to be Christmas’ most forgettable character or the most forgotten witness to the birth of Jesus. This Advent season – which begins today – I want to explore with you several characters we find in Jesus’ birth stories.

I’m calling this message series “Witnesses to the Wonder.” The wonder, of course, is what Christians call the Incarnation. One of the central truths of our faith is that God Himself took on human flesh, blood and personhood in Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament books of Matthew and Luke tell us about several characters who figured prominently in that amazing event. Next week we’ll consider the supernatural witnesses and the Sunday after that we’ll look at some unusual witnesses. Then the Sunday after Christmas Day we’ll conclude with two unexpected witnesses. But this morning, I want you to think with me about Joseph, the forgotten witness. He’s one of the most important witnesses to the wonder of God coming into this world as a human being. Let’s read about him and his role in the events surrounding what we now observe as Christmas. There are a couple of truths about Joseph that occur to me whenever I think about him. First of all, he was...

AN ORDINARY MAN IN AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT.

Do you know what stands out to me about Joseph? He’s so ordinary! He’s not the sort of man that stands out in a crowd. The Bible doesn’t give us much information about him. He’s mentioned in these stories about Jesus’ birth, of course, but then only one other time. It’s the time when Jesus is twelve years of age and they all visit the Temple in Jerusalem together. After that you never read anything more about Joseph. Most Bible scholars believe that Joseph had probably died before Jesus began His ministry. His mother, Mary, shows up in a lot of other places but not His earthly father, Joseph.

Why do I say Joseph is ordinary? He's ordinary economically. The Bible says he's a carpenter by profession. That means he's a man comfortable with construction and tools. He's just an ordinary, middle class working man. He's ordinary socially. Yes, he's a direct descendant of Israel's greatest king, David. But David had been king about a thousand years before Joseph lived and Joseph's family is no longer considered royal or noble. He came from a very ordinary town called Nazareth. There was nothing special or notable about Nazareth itself. Joseph is ordinary religiously. He's neither a rabbi nor a priest. Instead, he appears to be just a devout but rather ordinary follower of the Jewish faith. In every way that most people make distinctions and evaluations about the status of other people, Joseph comes up as being very ordinary.

Would you have picked Joseph to be the stepfather of the Savior of the world? I doubt I would have. He's just so ordinary! But God has this interesting tendency of picking very ordinary people to accomplish His will in this world. After all, the Bible does say, "Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God." (1 Cor 1:26-29 MSG)

God enjoys choosing people who the rest of us consider to be sort of painfully average, mediocre or "a dime a dozen" types and then uses them to get His work done in this world sometimes in some incredible ways. Don't make the mistake of thinking that just because someone is a character in the Bible that he or she is some of kind outstanding, superior human being. Don't assume that all or even most of them are spiritual heroes of some kind. Most of the characters in the Bible are very ordinary – and quite often – very flawed people. It's what God did in them and through them that's so extraordinary.

I hope that warms your heart today. It warms mine! The fact is that most of us here today are really quite ordinary. Most of us – if not all of us are – just like Joseph - economically, socially and religiously ordinary. You pick the category, the scale or the measurement and I suggest most of us turn out to be about average. In our culture, we've been taught that only very uniquely talented or gifted people should be noticed. Not only that, but we're taught to believe that only very uniquely talented or gifted people have anything of value to offer. As a pastor, I've discovered that most followers of Jesus think they have nothing of value to offer God or other people. They doubt they can make a difference much of anywhere. Some conclude that all they're good for is to warm a pew on Sundays and throw a few dollars in the offering plate as it goes by. But Joseph is the hero for all of us ordinary folk out there. He reminds us of the fact that God uses ordinary people to accomplish His purposes and plans. When God is in your life, He can use you to do extraordinary things.

I appreciate the perspective Pastor Rick Warren provides. He writes, “Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. That is quite a variety of misfits, but God used each of them in his service. He will use you too if you stop making excuses.”

During World War 2, the Allies bombed German cities. Elmer Bendinger, an American airman, tells how his B-17 was barraged by Nazi anti-aircraft guns on one particular bombing run. On this specific occasion, his gas tanks took a direct hit. A large shell had pierced the plane’s fuel tank without touching off a massive explosion. How could this be? Elmer’s pilot found out why. On the morning after the bombing raid, the pilot asked the crew chief for the shell as a souvenir of their unbelievable luck. The crew chief told the pilot that it wasn’t just one unexploded shell that had been found in the plane’s fuel tank. They had actually found eleven shells. Imagine – eleven unexploded shells were found in that plane’s gas tank when only one would have been sufficient to blow them out of the sky! The shells were sent off to be defused. When they opened the shells, they found no explosive charge in any of them. They were clean as a whistle and just as harmless. Empty – every one of them! Well, not all of them. One shell contained a carefully rolled up piece of paper inside. It was a message written in the Czech language. They eventually found a translator. The note read, “This is all we can do for now.” Apparently, ordinary Czech citizens had been forced by the Nazis to make bombs so they made it their goal to make harmless bombs. Just because you’re an ordinary person, don’t ever think you can’t have an extraordinary impact.

Joseph was ordinary, but the events around him were extraordinary. He discovered his fiancé, Mary, was pregnant and he knew he wasn’t the father. When he first found out, no one had told him yet that the little life growing inside Mary’s uterus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Now, while Joseph and Mary were as good as married from a legal point of view, they hadn’t begun to live together as husband and wife yet according to Jewish custom. They hadn’t slept together yet. Legally, Mary appeared to be guilty of adultery. Imagine how Joseph must have felt when he got news of Mary’s pregnancy. No doubt he was shocked, angry, devastated, terribly hurt and confused. It was probably the worst moment in his life up to that point in time.

Joseph could have taken a very different route than the one the Bible describes. He could have demanded justice and gotten revenge for Mary’s perceived unfaithfulness. The Old Testament is quite explicit. A woman in Mary’s situation was to be taken out and stoned to death by the community. But because he still

loves Mary deeply, Joseph can't bear the thought of her death or such public ridicule. Instead, he chooses to divorce her as quietly as possible. Yes, of course, that would have been public, too. Yes, of course, that would have been shameful, too. But at least Mary's life would be spared and perhaps over the years the pain of it all would diminish for both of them and their families. Joseph is an ordinary man caught up in an extraordinary event. But that's not the whole story. What you discover is that Joseph is also...

AN ORDINARY MAN WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY FAITH.

The Bible says this about Joseph, "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...." (Mt 1:20 NIV) I don't know about you, but there's a part of me that wants to say, "Lord, it's about time!" I'd like to ask God, "Why didn't you tell Joseph what was going to happen to Mary before it happened? Why did you allow him to go through all that emotional turmoil?" The Bible doesn't answer those questions. It's just the way God is sometimes. God rarely if ever tells you the reasons why you go through very difficult times in life before you go through them. More often than not months and even years can go by before you receive even a glimpse of why some crisis came into your life. And then sometimes you never know this side of Heaven why that job turned out so badly, or why your marriage failed, or why your kid screwed up so badly, or why a precious loved one died prematurely, or why you have a broken relationship with someone in your family, or why your health fails or why your ability to remember and to reason grows dim as you age.

Have you discovered that about God? There's little if any advance warning from Him when a crisis is coming your way. By the same token, He doesn't always rush in immediately after a crisis comes your way and just put all the pieces of the puzzle back together just so. Why is that? One reason is because God wants to develop something in you and me that the Bible calls faith. And real faith involves the ability to keep on loving God, to keep on trusting God, to keep on obeying God and to keep on living for God even when you don't understand what is happening to you, why God allowed it and why He doesn't fix it.

I've never taken flying lessons, but I've heard that those who do fly planes often get to the place where they can fly a plane using the instruments alone rather than just their eyes. That's a whole different level of proficiency and certification. Why is that so important? Some day a pilot may find himself or herself in a storm and experience vertigo – the loss of the sense of equilibrium. When that happens to you, your senses can't tell you anything reliable about where you're going – up, down, straight, sideways. When that happens, you can no longer trust your senses. You must rely on your instruments. Into your life and mine will come many a storm and it's easy to lose your spiritual and emotional equilibrium. You wonder where God has gone. You ask Him why He's allowed this happen to you. That's when it becomes essential to follow the instrument of God's Word. The Bible tells you that God always loves you and will never forsake you despite

what it looks and feels like when the storm is raging around you. When you continue to hold on to that truth – that’s faith.

Don’t you wonder what Joseph was thinking as the angel spoke to him? “Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She hasn’t been unfaithful to you, Joseph. She loves you. The life conceived within her is by God Himself. Take Mary into your home, Joseph. Be a father to the child. Name Him “Jesus” which means “the Lord is salvation.” He’s going to save people from their sins. Mary’s child is Emmanuel – “God with us” – just as the prophet Isaiah predicted so long ago.”

It’s impossible to get inside of Joseph and to know what he thought or felt at that moment. But here’s what you can know about Joseph. He’s obedient to God. He obeys the words of the angel and takes Mary home. But Joseph doesn’t sleep with Mary until Jesus is born. Can you imagine all of his unanswered questions? Can you imagine his doubts, his concerns and his fears? Can you imagine what it would have been like to try and explain this situation to his family and friends? But what challenges me when I look at Joseph’s faith is his simple obedience. He didn’t understand everything, but he obeyed God. Like Joseph, there will be times you will not understand what God is doing in your life either. That’s OK. You need to keep on loving God, keep on trusting God, keep on obeying God and keep on living for Him, nevertheless. That’s faith. God is far more interested in you and me obeying His will than understanding it. Faith means obeying God even when you don’t understand Him.

Here’s yet another example of a truth you find all through the Bible. Obedience results in blessing. When you obey God, God blesses your life. It’s true; you can never earn God’s grace. But in everyday life and living you can short circuit that grace and all the blessing that God want to give you through your own self-destructive disobedience. What if Joseph had disobeyed what God told him to do through the angel? What if he’d said, “The heck with You and Mary, God! I’m outta here!” God would have found another way to accomplish His will. But Joseph would have missed forever the blessing of raising the King of kings and the Lord of lords from birth to adulthood. But because he obeyed God, Joseph will enjoy that blessing throughout all eternity and no one will ever take it away from him. How does the wonderful old hymn put it? “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” If you trust God, but don’t obey Him, you’ll fail. If you obey God, but don’t trust Him, you’ll also fail. You need to do both. Trust is one thing and obedience is another, but they go together. When you trust and obey, blessing will inevitably follow.

Matt Woodley was watching his 18-year-old son participate in an X-ball paintball tournament. With sophisticated paintball guns that shoot 13 paintballs per second, the matches are quick and exciting. They’re also chaotic. The X-ball concept depends on five players from each team shooting at their opponents and working their way up a large outdoor field. The goal is to hit the other team’s players with a paintball and eventually capture their flag. But it’s not an easy

task. In the midst of thousands of flying paintballs it's tough to spot your opponents. The other team can crouch and dive behind bunkers and barriers.

To make matters even worse, as your team's coach shouts the right information about your opponents' locations, the other team's fans start yelling false information. When Matt heard the other fans intentionally confusing his son's teammates, he was shocked. It seemed like cheating to him. But after the match his son calmly informed him, "O, yeah, that's called 'counter-coaching.' They're trying to distract our players with false information. It's part of the game, Dad. We have to deal with it all the time. It just means that we have to focus on our coach and block out all the other distractions."

The Bible clearly warns you that it's not easy to listen for God's voice. There will be plenty of "counter coaching" from the culture, the devil, and from your own distracted heart. As Matt Woodley's son said, "That's part of the game. We have to deal with it all the time." And there's only one way to combat spiritual counter-coaching: know the voice of Jesus, hang on to His every word and trust and obey Him—even when the crowd tells you to do something else.

Joseph may have been just an ordinary man, but there was nothing ordinary about his faith. What if Joseph had listened to all the "counter-coaching" going on around him instead of the voice of God? He would have missed out on an incredible and eternal blessing. Joseph's faith was extraordinary. I want that kind of faith on Christmas Day and every other day. I want to hold on to God even when I don't always understand everything He allows to come into my life. I want those tough moments in life to push me towards Him and not away from Him. I want to trust and obey knowing that that's when the blessing comes. I want to keep on loving Him, keeping on obeying Him, keep on trusting Him and keep on living for Him until He comes and takes me home. How about you?