

Christmas is so close! It is so close that we can almost hear the clank of reigns and bridles as Santa gets his sleigh ready, or the steady tread of a donkey making its way to Bethlehem. Some of us are big Christmas people and we can't wait for that moment on Christmas morning. Others, like me, are tired of having to shop with headphones to block out the Christmas music that has been playing almost since Halloween. Either way, we are probably ready for Christmas to just be here.

But Advent is a time that teaches us about the discipline of waiting. And something interesting happens when we take time to wait and prepare. The more we wait, the more we have opportunities to think about the mystery of the incarnation and the meaning of Jesus' birth even while we are still getting ready for Christmas. And the more we do this, the more we learn about some of the characters in the Gospel stories that we may not think about that often. Earlier this Advent, for example, we focused quite a bit on John the Baptist, in a way that I think enriches our faith and our appreciation of Christmas.

Our Gospel reading today is another great example of how that can work. Now, on the surface, it seems a bit strange. It isn't Christmas yet, but we are reading an account of Jesus' birth. And yet this isn't the account we are used to from our Christmas pageants. This isn't Luke's story with shepherds and angels and no room at the inn. Instead, we read Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. And Matthew's account is unique in that it focuses on the character of Joseph.

It's interesting that the lectionary asks us to pause today and think about Joseph, just a few days before Christmas. After all, Joseph often tends to disappear into our Christmas story. He's just a stoic guy standing stage right at the pageant while his young wife and the baby in swaddling clothes gets all the attention. We focus on Mary's choice to say yes to God, and rightly so, but we often don't take enough time to think about Joseph's role and his importance to Jesus' story.

My wife and I are huge fans of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. If you ever want to see some artistic depictions of Joseph, there are plenty in both the medieval and Renaissance collections – just look for depictions of the nativity or what historically was known as “the Holy Family” – Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

You'll notice two things in almost all the paintings. First, Joseph is *old* compared to Mary. You'll have Mary there, very young, and Joseph legitimately looks like he is pushing 65 or 70. This may seem pretty strange to us, but it follows old

Christian tradition that says Joseph had been married and widowed prior to meeting Mary and even had children prior to getting involved with Mary. Of course, this is another one of those pious legends like we saw with Dismas the good thief, and we don't know if this was true at all.

The even more interesting thing you might notice is that in many of the pictures, Joseph appears to be nodding off, taking a little nap while everyone else goes about the important business of the incarnation.

Of course, on one hand this makes sense. After all in the Gospel, Joseph is reportedly seen receiving messages from God in dreams. So when he is shown asleep in, say, Renaissance portraits, we are supposed to be imagining that he is having one of his dreams and receiving messages from God. Not only does he have a dream that asks him to accept Mary as his wife, elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew he also has dreams about fleeing to Egypt and about when it is safe to return.

On the other hand, I think it is also the perfect metaphor for how Joseph tends to just drop out of the Christmas story after today. Like I said, he is often just a stage accessory for much of the Christmas pageant. He doesn't say much and in fact we could imagine that he could just nod off and nobody would really notice.

Now, as I've said, we don't know much about the details of Joseph's life. We don't know if he was really old or young, married before or not, a father before or not. In many ways his life before and after the birth of Jesus remain a hidden cipher, a mystery to us. But I think we do learn quite a bit about his character in this short passage from the Gospel of Matthew.

The first thing we really learn about Joseph here is that, in human terms, he is a pretty decent guy. He is betrothed to Mary. We should remember that in the first century a betrothal was much more binding than the kind of marriage engagements we know today. Marriage in biblical times took part in two stages. Mary hadn't gone through the second stage, where she and Joseph would have moved in together, but she had gone through the first stage, where she was considered to be in a binding contract with him. And Joseph learns that Mary has become pregnant – that she has broken their engagement in a way that would have been just as painful and humiliating as it would be today, but in a way that also had legal ramifications in terms of ending their marriage contract.

Joseph's reaction, as described in today's text, was that he would "dismiss her quietly" without "public disgrace." But in Joseph and Mary's time this was even more significant. Divorce was very easy for men to obtain in the first century – they just had to present their wife or betrothed with a declaration that they no longer wished for the marriage to exist. Life for divorced women was rarely easy in the first century. But Joseph could have made it far worse by publicizing the reasons for ending the engagement. In fact, in our own day, we can imagine someone being blasted all over Facebook and social media for doing just this. Mary would have been left with her reputation shattered, a child to raise, and her family burdened with both their care. And Joseph even at the outset was a good enough person not to want to make things worse for her.

But God needed Joseph to do more than just be a pretty decent guy. God needed Joseph to make a very difficult and momentous choice. And so Joseph fell into one of his dreams. And an angel came to him and told him not to be afraid to marry his fiancée, because Mary was pregnant with a child conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Now it is a bit hard to put yourself in Joseph's shoes and imagine what he must have been thinking. We don't learn much about that inner aspect of Joseph's thoughts. But I can only imagine that he has gone through a rollercoaster of emotions. After first discovering that Mary had apparently broken their engagement by being unfaithful to him – which must have brought its own depths of pain and anger – now Joseph is being told that her pregnancy instead has a divine origin. To be honest, I think I would have been much more frightened by the truth the angel brought in the dream than by the things Joseph must have assumed before the dream.

But Joseph doesn't seem to hesitate – the text simply says that "he did as the Lord commanded him" once he woke up from his dream.

As we prepare for Christmas as I've said, we often think about the choices that Mary made for God – and we should. They were huge, momentous choices. Luke focuses on those choices that Mary made.

But Joseph also had to make momentous choices. For whatever reason, God apparently felt it was important to have this particular man in the role essentially of Jesus' stepfather. We might also think of him as Jesus' adoptive father, but as a stepdad, I like to think of him as a stepfather. I think for those of us who are also stepparents, like Joseph was, this is particularly meaningful as we approach the Christmas season and remember that God found our role something truly worth caring about.

And yet after this, Joseph's role in the biblical narrative becomes pretty thin. In Matthew, as I've said, we go on to read how he has dreams that protect the family from King Herod and then let them know when it is safe to go back to Israel, where they settle in Nazareth.

The next time we encounter Joseph is in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus is about 12. As best we can tell, Joseph has been going on living in Nazareth with Mary and their family, and quietly making the right choices, fulfilling the role that God has chosen for him to play out. In that scene in Luke, as you may recall, Jesus gets separated from his parents and Joseph helps Mary search for him, ultimately finding him in the temple.

After that, we really don't hear from Joseph again. Unlike Mary, he doesn't reappear near the end of the Gospel narratives. Maybe the old Christian legends were right. Maybe he was a lot older than Mary and had already passed away by the time Jesus began his public ministry, or certainly by the time of the events at the end of Jesus' earthly life.

But even more to the point, Joseph to me is the epitome of a quiet saint. We talked a lot about quiet saints during our stewardship campaign, and with Joseph we truly meet the biblical example of one. His life as portrayed in the bible isn't flashy or poetic. He doesn't get to sing a beautiful song like Mary's Magnificat or even to issue a powerful prophecy like John the Baptist's father Zechariah. As far as we can tell, he just goes about his life, quietly doing the right things, making the right choices, and pursuing God's plan for his life.

I think Joseph's example can speak to a lot of us. Let me be clear. I don't think we have a set of things we have to do in order to get God to love us. But I know that because God has loved us – freely and without condition – we are called to a new way of life.

And that way of life asks us to make choices. Sometimes those choices can be hard.

Whether we are parents or stepparents, spouses or partners, neighbors or fellow church members, we are called on to make choices.

In many cases, we are called to put others before ourselves – or, maybe that is not quite right. We are called on to see that what is good for our spouse, our children, our friends, our neighbors, our church family – that these things are good for us too. Because when we are brought into the realm of Christ's love, God no longer wants us to be alone. We are called to be people in community with others.

This Advent, as I've prepared for this sermon, I've learned a lot of lessons from Joseph about my role as a husband and a stepfather. Joseph has reminded me that love is not really an emotion, or at least not just an emotion. It is not just about the things we feel and the words we say. Love, the way Joseph enacted it, is about the daily choice to do the right thing – to get up, like Joseph said, and do what God is asking us to do. Does that mean it is always easy to, say, be up at 6 am for the school bus when Brittney isn't available? I'm not going to say it necessarily makes me happy. But it does fill me with a joy – a joy of knowing that, like Joseph, God has put me in a place where I am needed and where I can make a difference in the lives of people that I love. Joseph's story doesn't necessarily take the sleep out of my eyes, but it does fill my heart with a sense of meaning in daily life.

Most of us are going to spend most of our lives just like Joseph – making the right choices without any flashy celebrations, without the things we do right ever making it into the newspaper or even onto Facebook. To the extent we are able to be saintly, we will be quietly saintly, like Joseph. And his story reminds us that that is okay.

And to the extent that we fail, and don't always choose the right things, I think Joseph's story has something to say to us too. After all, Joseph was getting ready to make the wrong decision, in God's eyes – our translation says he had his dream just as he had "resolved" on the wrong choice. So when we make the wrong choices, just like Joseph, we can still get up again and get back on the right track.

So yes, Christmas is so close. We may want to lean into the promise of Christmas day – or, yes, just to get rid of that awful Cist. But I think today's story about Joseph teaches us the value of waiting during Advent. As we move through Advent, as we take this time to pause and reflect, we may find that our experience of Christmas is richer than it would have been otherwise. So I hope you can use these last few days of Advent to ponder in your heart the mystery of the God who is always coming to be with us.