

## WAITING FOR DAWN: “The Silent Carpenter”

Isaiah 2:1-5 & Matthew 1:18-25

December 1, 2013 ~ Rev. James Ramsey

We first meet Joseph in great distress as he gradually comes to realize that his betrothed (read *fiancé*) is with child.

Joseph did not want to expose Mary to the legal system, for her position was hopelessly compromised, and all that she could expect was disgrace and suffering. He wanted to handle the situation quietly, and “quietly” is the appropriate word to describe Joseph, for in the Bible he utters not one word; he walked quietly, and he handled the affairs of his life with dignity and discretion. Joseph was an upright man who, as scripture says, “slept the sleep of the just,” that is, he slept in trust of God's providence.

It was at night in an interior silence that he was able to surrender the fears of the day; in the night he yielded up the burden of his anxiety and his anguish. In a spirit of faith he slept in innocence like a child before the loving gaze of his father. God cannot resist such faith.

It was in that quiet of night, of sleep and dreams, that God sent his angel to Joseph who said to him:

*Joseph, son of David, have no fear to take Mary as your wife. The child she has conceived is of the Holy Spirit. She is to have a son, who is to be named Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21)*



Joseph's anxiety about Mary's shame was now replaced with the wonder of her

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glory. His anxiety about the future was now transformed into an expectation of God's power.

When the angel said, “Have no fear,” Joseph surrendered his fears and quietly obeyed the directive he was given. The way that Mary conceived the child is related with great precision:

*The Holy Spirit will come down upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born to you will be called holy, the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)*

The angel who announced this miraculous event to Mary repeated the same message to Joseph.

Joseph understood the gravity of these words -- that the presence of God filled Mary according to the same pattern that holy presence had filled the Ark of the Covenant in ancient times.

For in Exodus, it says that: *the cloud settled down upon the Ark and the glory of the LORD filled it. (Exodus 40:35)*

Such words of divine power spoken about the most sacred vessel in Israel were well known to the just and faithful Israelites.

In like manner, Mary would be a kind of sacred vessel. Joseph received her into his house not only as his wife, but also something like an ancient Hebrew priest would receive and honor the Ark of the Covenant.

Joseph would have to surrender his fears again and again in his life. He would have to rely on God's Providence when he carried Mary down to Bethlehem.

The Roman law requiring a census was difficult enough to obey, but it was that much more difficult for Joseph, for he would take Mary away from Nazareth as she entered the time of her "confinement" in the last weeks before she bore the child.

Joseph surely knew that this was the wrong time to take a woman on a journey. He knew the custom of ancient Israel had always been that a woman must never be seen in public during her time of confinement. Because she was entering into a holy mystery, she was to be hidden away like the Ark of the Covenant was hidden behind a curtain. He could have left her behind.

But Joseph chose to take her on the long, dangerous road to Bethlehem during this sacred time. Just as in the beginning, when he was unwilling to expose her to the law, so now...as the time of her delivery drew near, he did not wish her to be subjected to the shame of her village. He knew every busybody in town would count how many months there were from the day of the wedding to the day the child was born.

So he pretended that it was still timely, that Mary was perfectly well to travel. He took a great risk; he gambled that she would be all right, that she could endure the arduous journey. He did not want her to suffer the hardships of travel, but he knew that she would certainly suffer more, should she be left behind to bear the child in Nazareth.

And so Joseph fulfilled the edict of Caesar Augustus in the worst of all times, and yet in the Providence of God, it was the best of all times, for the child would be born in the city of David, as foretold in the scriptures, by the prophets of old:

*And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel. (Matthew 2:6)*

Even in fear, Joseph fulfilled the plan of God. His anxiety was transformed to awe at the work of God, for when the child was born, angels appeared in the heavens announcing his birth to the shepherds and to all people of good will.



As the father of Jesus, Joseph would dream more dreams, would be visited again and again by the angel. Soon after the birth of his son, Joseph would be commanded to take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt in order to escape Herod. Joseph had to conquer fear once more as he and his young family ventured out onto the roads in the dead of night. Joseph put his trust in God, even with all the questions in his head:

- Could he keep them safe?
- Could he resist bandits along the road?
- Would they be able to outpace the agents of Herod?
- Where would they go?
- How long would he be exiled in Egypt?
- Could he find lodging and work enough to provide for their needs?



After some time, after God had provided for Joseph and his family in Egypt, the angel appeared again and summoned him back. Joseph, yet again made a long journey...back to Galilee, and settled his family in the hill country in the town of Nazareth, fulfilling the word of the prophet: *He shall be called a Nazorean.*" (Matthew 2:23)

By any account, Joseph cherished Jesus, the son of Mary; cherished the boy who was not his own – an extraordinary thing at any time, but almost without precedent in ancient times.



Joseph would teach the boy his trade, give Jesus the best love he had—the love of his work, his labor – not just the labor to make money, but the labor to make a person, the labor of a craft, the art of expressing himself through the honest work of his hands. Jesus learned to be a man from his foster-father. Joseph taught him by example, by his kindness, by his constant presence.

Jesus learned to be industrious and hard-working. From laboring side by side with Joseph,

Jesus would learn the craft of human salvation. From Joseph, Jesus learned how to wait on God, to listen for his voice, and to carry out his will.

Not one word was ever recorded from the mouth of Joseph. As far as the Bible is concerned he remained silent, and yet he achieved much.

Joseph resembles his namesake...the ancient patriarch in the Old Testament book of Genesis. You remember



Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, and his coat of many colors. Joseph, who slept, and dreamed great dreams about the will of God and the future of his people.

Like that ancient patriarch of old, Joseph, the patriarch of the New Testament dreamed dreams, and God spoke to him about his son who was to save his people from their sins. Just as Joseph lived in trust and quietly waited for the voice of God, so he can be for us a guide in the Advent of our lives—the time which certainly stretches far beyond these few weeks before Christmas.

Maybe we, too, are in the midst of a kind of fearful journey, patching together our days from fearful plans and fleeting joys. We labor and we rest, but in our dreams do angels alternately warn and console us?

We are called to Joseph-like faith, where trust is silent and deep enough for the voice of God to guide us, and for the Son of God to visit us and even to make a dwelling place within us, just as he did in Nazareth in the little home of Joseph and Mary.