

He's the odd man out in the Christmas story. To us he's often a supporting actor whom we all too easily overlook. But this Christmas Eve I want to zero in on St. Joseph of Nazareth, the carpenter, the builder, the adopted father of Jesus.

The story of the first Christmas is familiar to us. We read it every year. We see it through a haze of nostalgia. We have the benefit of hindsight. But what would that first Christmas have been like for those who experienced it firsthand? More specifically, what thoughts and feelings might have been running through Joseph's head some 2,020-plus Christmases ago?

First off, most of the paintings we have of Joseph probably do him a great injustice. Most paintings portray Joseph as old and weak. This was probably not the case. Joseph was most likely a teenager, like Mary. Or, given the average life expectancy of the time, if he were older than Mary, he was much more likely to be in his 20's rather than in his 70's. And as a carpenter, he would have been trained not only in building with wood, but with stone masonry as well. That takes real physical strength. Joseph certainly wouldn't have been weak. If he were, his family would have starved.

Joseph, I'm sure, was looking forward to his wedding with Mary. Their betrothal and impending marriage would probably have been arranged by their parents.

And Joseph obviously bore feelings of affection for Mary. I can say that because when it became apparent that Mary was pregnant, Joseph could have made a big stink. Joseph knew that he had no part in the conception. Joseph could have shamed Mary in front of the whole town—in fact publically shaming Mary would be what was expected by most people in their culture. But Joseph decided to break things off with Mary quietly. He decided to end their betrothal as was required by the law. And Joseph probably felt angry and betrayed by Mary. But he decided to end their engagement quietly, without subjecting Mary to public disgrace and humiliation, which he could have easily done.

And then, in the midst of what must have been a very rough time in Joseph's life, in the midst of anger and confusion, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

The angel delivered to Joseph an explanation and an expectation. 'Hey Joseph. Mary hasn't betrayed you. Mary is with child because of God. And the child will be special. He will be Emmanuel, God with us. And you, Joseph, are to be his father, for you are to name him and you are to claim him. You are to adopt him as your own son by giving him his name.'

Don't miss this. There were no DNA paternity tests back in Joseph's day. The only paternity test they had was whether a father would claim a child or not. Joseph will claim Jesus as his son by naming him on the day of his circumcision. And Joseph names him Jesus in accordance with the angel's instructions to him: 'He will be called Jesus, (which means Savior), for he will save his people from their sins.'

Joseph paid attention to what the angel had said. He took Mary into his own home. And they began to prepare together for the birth of the baby.

Like any other father-to-be, Joseph would have been there to deal with all of the up and down emotions, all the raging hormones of a pregnant wife. But to make matters worse, when Mary was just about ready to deliver, Joseph had to tell her, "Guess what sweetie. We've got to take a trip to Bethlehem." I don't know of any man who would relish the idea of telling his very pregnant wife that she needed to get up and make an 80-mile trip either on foot or on the back of a donkey. I suspect that neither Joseph nor Mary were very pleased with the prospect.

And then after a long 5 or 6-day trip, they arrived in Bethlehem. And in Bethlehem, Luke says, the guest rooms were all full because of the census. So Mary and Joseph have to bunk down where the animals are kept.

And then Mary goes into labor. The birth process is frightening enough for first time parents in a clean hospital with a slew of doctors and nurses around. How much scarier it must have been for Joseph and Mary, probably with a midwife whom they had never met before, a six days' journey away from home.

The place smelled of animals. The manger was tainted with animal slobber. But it was the best that they were going to be able to do. And there, in the midst of the dirt and drool and smells of manure the baby was born. In the midst of the blood and sweat and pain of labor, the baby was born.

Like any father, Joseph's heart and thoughts would have been racing. 'Is Mary all right? Is the baby all right? Is it a boy like the angel had said? Does he have 10 fingers and 10 toes?'

And then, the baby was placed in a square of cloth and wrapped snugly with cloth strips. Joseph was able to find some clean straw. And they placed the baby in the animal trough.

That first night, while Mary and Jesus slept, I suspect Joseph tip-toed over to that manger many times to check on the baby. The infant mortality rate in those days was very high. 'Was he still breathing?' Many babies died soon after birth in much more favorable conditions than these. 'Would this baby live? Was he really ready to be a father?'

But I suspect Joseph had deeper, more spiritual thoughts as well. Was the message he'd heard in his dream really true? Would this little baby really grow to adulthood and become the Savior of Israel? And how could he, Joseph, possibly be a good father to this child, especially if this child really was Emmanuel, God with us?

And then, after an exhausting ordeal, maybe after Joseph had just dozed off himself, something else happened. This sleazy bunch of shepherds showed up. Shepherds were regarded as the dregs of society, down there on the bottom rung with prostitutes and camel drivers. Good Jews didn't have anything to do with shepherds. So shepherd showing up unexpectedly at the manger would be like having members of a motorcycle gang show up unexpectedly in the recovery room of the hospital saying, "We want to see your baby."

Joseph must have been fuming. He might have been ready to blow his top. In addition to having a baby in these conditions, in addition to being far away from home, in addition to having to keep his new family with the animals, now he had to put up with a bunch of drunken low life shepherds?

But the shepherds weren't drunk with wine. The shepherds were drunk with excitement. They were camped out in the hills, huddled around their campfires and watching their sheep:

"(When,) suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified (but) the angel said, 'Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody around the world: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.'

"(And) at once the angel was joined by a huge choir of angels singing God's praises: 'Glory to God in the heavenly heights. Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.'"<sup>1</sup>

The birth of Jesus didn't happen the way Joseph would have planned it. It was full of stress for all concerned. For Joseph, it wasn't a Silent Night. And it probably didn't seem like a Holy Night at the time. But the message the shepherds brought must have cheered Joseph's heart.

God is here in a special way. God is involved in what's going on. God has become one of us, Emmanuel, God with us.

Now I don't know about you, but Christmas has never gone perfectly the way I would have wanted it to. And my Christmas never looks like it does on TV. I've never pulled up to a house in the middle of snowy woods riding in a horse drawn sleigh. Our Christmas tree doesn't look like Martha Stewart spent a week decorating it. The food doesn't magically appear out of nowhere—it takes a lot of work and preparation.

A couple of times we've been away from our families, and we've had rather lonely Christmases. But even when we're with our families, things aren't perfect, because our families aren't perfect. We're real people, we have real problems. We sometimes have squabbles and arguments, even at Christmas.

But then, things weren't perfect in Bethlehem 2,020 years ago either. The birth of Jesus didn't follow the script of some Hollywood fairy tale.

Jesus didn't come to us in the midst of comfort. He wasn't born in glamorous conditions. He didn't sleep in a beautiful hand-carved cradle covered with gold. Instead, Jesus came into the real world in a real way, amongst real people with real problems.

But the Good News about his birth is the same as it was some 2,020 Christmases ago: God is here in a special way. God is involved in what's going on. In Jesus, God has become Emmanuel, God with us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:9-14 (from *The Message*)

Jesus has come to save us from the power of sin and death. Jesus has come to abide with us and in us. Jesus has come to lead us into eternal life.

"Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord...  
Glory to God in the highest heaven. And on earth peace, among those whom he favors!"