

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon Title: "Father Joseph" (The Christmas Family Portrait)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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When we travel in the car during the holidays, mostly likely we want to get the trip finished as soon as possible. We try to shorten the time in some way, because we cannot endure hours locked inside that vehicle. So we place headphones on our ears, and try to drown out the world around us. Or, we might count license plates along the way – once we counted at least 30 different states and four provinces of Canada. We might read billboards or talk about some important subject for hours or sleep most of the time way.

It is roughly 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as the crow flies from the north of Israel to the south. In a car it would take an hour, if the highways are paved as they are in the US. On foot, however, it takes about a week. That distance and time give one a lot of opportunities to think about many things. Father Joseph had much to consider, as he took the 70-mile journey with Mary, who probably was riding on a donkey.

Father Joseph has much to consider, before the

couple gets to Bethlehem. Joseph hears the rhythm of the donkey's footsteps, as he pulls the animal behind him. He glances back to his fiancée to see how she's doing. Mary looks comfortable enough, even though she is weeks, or maybe days, away from giving birth to their first child. Joseph can only hope the Baby will wait until they get to Bethlehem.

Ah yes, the Baby, Father Joseph thinks. The third traveler in their convoy, heading to Bethlehem. The Baby, God-incarnate, conceived by the Holy Spirit. What a strange idea. Father Joseph peers into the sky, hoping to see God's face somewhere up there, wondering how his Baby can really be God's Baby.

A year or so before this journey to Bethlehem, Joseph wasn't an expectant father. He was getting ready to get married. It seemed only yesterday when Joseph's father talked to Mary's father, and the two men agreed that their children could marry one another. Without the formal agreement between the two fathers, no one would be joined in holy matrimony. Deals were made, items of worth were exchanged, and now Joseph is looking forward to his family joining with Mary's.

The wedding plans seem to be going well: relatives receive invitations, the place for the marriage

ceremony is nailed down, and the rabbi is eager to participate. As the day of the wedding draws closer, Mary starts to act strangely. Joseph notices his fiancée distancing herself from him. She seems scared to be around him. Joseph figures it must be marriage jitters that all couples feel before their weddings. Even Joseph is feeling them. He tries to talk with Mary, but she is never in the mood to talk. The wedding ceremony draws closer, but Mary is drawing away from her betrothed.

Joseph finally sits her down to talk. She won't at first, but he presses her. "What's going on?" Joseph asks. "Are you having problems marrying me? Maybe we ought to speak with our fathers?"

No, Mary doesn't want to speak with her father. It isn't that she doesn't want to get married. It's that something happened to her several months ago. Something really odd has happened, and she hasn't been sure how to approach the subject with her fiancé. As Mary speaks she rubs her tummy, and Joseph notices the motion. It is the first time he is able to sit closely enough to see her tummy is a bit larger than normal. Mary rubs her tummy like a mother expecting a baby to arrive. Everything hits Joseph like a ton of bricks. He finally understands why she has been avoiding him.

Joseph walks away dumbfounded. He feels like he just got kicked in the stomach. How could Mary have a baby? Joseph knows he didn't touch her. The baby is not his! *Someone* must have been with her. Mary cannot have a baby by herself without sneaking behind Joseph's back.

His emotions turn from anger to rejection then back to anger. He knows the baby born out of wedlock will cause a scandal against Mary not only with her family but also with the village. Mary will become the black sheep, the naughty girl who cannot control her body. She may even face the penalty of being stoned for her infidelity.

Joseph cannot become a part of the scandal, because he knows he did nothing wrong. He will have to convince people he did nothing wrong. The baby is not his. Although Joseph is upset, he knows that he cannot throw Mary under the bus by divorcing her publicly. Joseph's got to separate from his fiancée quietly, so he can save both his and Mary's reputations. Joseph will speak to the fathers of their families who agreed to the marriage, and ask them to dissolve their agreement without reason. The fathers will scream and cause a ruckus and demand justice, and Joseph will have to receive the force of their anger,

not Mary. He must get the fathers to dissolve the marriage agreement, and do it as quietly as possible. This will be easier said than done.

We make all sorts of plans for our lives. We make plans for today, tomorrow, and the distant future. It seems like all we do sometimes is make plans, because there is always something that needs to be done, and we have to find the time to do it. Every year I pull out the calendar for December, and I write down every single thing my family and I have to do. Most of these things we want to do, because they make Advent itself a little more special. So my calendar gets filled up with Christmas parties, band concerts, choral concerts, baking cookies and cakes, visiting Christmas light displays around the city, and handing out Christmas gifts to our Food Pantry families. I am so meticulous about my Advent Calendar, that I even schedule time to watch Christmas movies that we must see as a family. It's tradition – it has to happen. It seems as though we are always making plans for something, always writing events on the calendar in which to participate.

Some of these plans that we make are pretty big. Father Joseph had to create a plan that was really big, bigger than the plan he had made to marry his fiancée.

Our plans will cause major changes in our lives, so we have to make the right plans. We might talk to people about what they think of our plans. We gather the necessary information to make decisions. We follow a course of action. And then, we *might* pray about the plans we make, or at least we say we have prayed about our plans. Yeah, we talked with God about those plans we created but really only once or twice; we became too busy to keep praying with God. Yeah, we want God to get on board with our plans, hoping he doesn't change them much. Yeah, we go ahead with most plans, whether God has blessed them or not.

We can probably count on one hand the number of times we followed God's plan, while chucking our own plans out the window. We do not easily get rid of our plans, replacing them with God's plans. When our minds are made up and we follow a course of action, rarely do we start all over again with God being the force behind the process.

We act like safari travelers cutting through a jungle with machetes. We cut branches into bridges to cross chasms, we carve large trunks into boats to travel over rapids, and we sharpen our machetes along the way to do more cutting. God, the leader of our safari group, sits high in the trees, surveying the entire situation, and God yells to us, "Hey, we are in the wrong jungle!"

We are following the wrong path! Let's move that way!" We've been too busy cutting things away, that we say to God, "Oh, don't worry. We may be in the wrong jungle but we're making progress."¹ We make plans and hope God follows them. We seldom realize that God has plans for us.

If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans. God laughs, because he has the bigger picture of our lives right in front of him. God laughs, because maybe we are impatient people. Maybe we are stubborn, prideful people. Maybe we cannot admit that not all of our plans are the right ones. Whatever it is, God laughs because we do not see as God sees. I personally don't think God laughs at us in ridicule, as though we are like a teenager walking through the cafeteria in high school, and we suddenly trip and spill our tray of food across the floor. Other teenagers would point and laugh at our misfortunate. No, I think God laughs more like Santa Claus, who hears something that is amusing, but is ready to correct our folly with wise words.

Father Joseph had a plan, and God laughed. Once Joseph noticed Mary was pregnant, he decided to call off the wedding. He thought it was the best course of

¹ Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*, 15.

action. The plan was sound. It even sounded admirable, not throwing her under the bus by divorcing her publicly. Father Joseph was about to execute his plan, and God laughed. God then revealed his true plans to Father Joseph in a dream.

Thank goodness God works in our lives. God works with us, even if we don't choose to work with God. In my last church, I used to work with another Presbyterian minister through our ministerium, and he told me once that he was thankful that God still works in the world, despite what we try to do. He used to work with the youth of another Presbyterian Church, and he would try to plan all sorts of lessons in order to teach those youth everything he knew about God. And then his plans would change. There was always one youth who had a question that needed time to answer. Or, there was always a situation that would arise that all the youth had to talk about, so they all could figure out what God wanted them to do. This one pastor told me that he could plan all he wants, but God works in spite of his plans, and lives are transformed.

God enters our lives with his great power. He causes events to occur that match how *he* wants our lives to go. God overhauls our plans, whether we want

God to do so or not. He allows mistakes to happen, allowing a wrench or two to be thrown into our well-oiled plans, so we may grow from our defeats. God allows a small victory to be had to let us know we are on the right track. During the whole time God is trying to turn our attention to him. He is trying to open our eyes and ears long enough, so that we may understand what his perfect plans are.

God has the blueprint of our lives right in front of him. God is the Master Architect, the Chief Engineer who knows all the events that will come our way. God does not have the blueprints in front of him just to casually observe us from a distance. God has the blueprints, so he may get involved. God wants to be involved with every plan, every schedule, every deadline, every events; and he should be, because God already sees the paths we should take.

God had other plans for Father Joseph. Even as Joseph rehearsed his own plan, tweaking it here and there to make sure it would work smoothly, God intervened. An angel of God told Father Joseph not to separate from his fiancée, not to reject her for having a child. The angel had to alert Joseph to the fact that God's perfect will was going to be accomplished through his soon-to-be-wife Mary. Father Joseph had to become a part of that scandalous, outrageous plan,

for such a plan would save the entire world from eternal darkness. Father Joseph awoke from his dream, and he scrapped his plan. He heard God laugh, and he understood the folly of what he was going to do. He let Mary know it was okay for her to bear God's Son. The wedding ceremony would go forward as planned. Father Joseph would help raise the child as his own.

Nearly nine months later, Father Joseph looks back once more to his wife riding on a donkey over a rocky patch of road. She smiles at him, and he smiles back. He still cannot believe how God interrupted his life, not just by telling him to stay engaged to Mary but by giving her the Baby in the first place. He still cannot understand how the Holy Spirit overwhelmed her one day and gave her a child within her womb. It all sounds so foreign. It all sound so ridiculous. But Father Joseph remembers the dream. He remembers God's laughter. All he knows is that if he goes with the plan, all will work out for him, and Mary, and the entire world.

Father Joseph smiles once more at his soon-to-be wife. He notices her rubbing her very round belly. Father Joseph is glad that he scrapped his plans.