

## ***Ordinary Extraordinary Guys Doing Manly Work***

### ***Isaiah 7:1-10 and Matthew 1:18-25***

Generations upon generations have looked forward to the coming of that lovely Peaceable Kingdom that we heard about in last week's worship, with the wolf and the lamb, the little child and the viper all dwelling happily together, and we are waiting for the day when God brings it about. Surely such a reversal of business as normal, such a transformation would have to depend on God we like to think. It makes it easier on us – not so much pressure. But much of Scripture reminds us that we, we believers, have a role to play in the coming of that Kingdom.

Today's gospel lesson from Matthew builds on this truth of God working through ordinary people. It presents us with a remarkably brief depiction of the Nativity story – a half verse Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way – and in the verse bookending it at the end – but he had no marital relations with her until she had born a son, and he named him Jesus. Now, so many extraordinary things happen in the interim – the angel appearing in a dream, Isaiah's prophesy fulfilled, the virgin birth (pageant stuff) – so much that it is easy to forget that Mary and Joseph were real people – real flesh and blood human beings, largely like you and me.

Tradition, the arts, and two other gospel accounts draw our attention to Mary, the mother (and for the moment let's not go into a virgin or a young woman debate). And lovely, pure, and trusting, Mary is worthy of much attention, even devotion. But Matthew's focus is on Joseph – the tradesman (carpenter?), the husband, the father, the righteous man. Calm, protective, paternal. We don't know a lot about Joseph - he struggled with the announcement of the angel that his betrothed wife was pregnant and he needed instruction from a messenger from God (for that is what an angel is) to defy convention and norms to keep her as his wife and to take on the role as the legal father of the child. Imagine what that nine months held for both of them – anxiety, concern, flights of emotion! Hardly a “one blissful baby-shower after another.” Yet Joseph stayed faithful to his duties. Later on, he led the holy family to Egypt to get them out of danger from the Roman authorities, and then led them back to Nazareth (more angel-in-dreams going on here) and we know that he observed the Jewish ritual of going up to the Temple with his family to celebrate Passover. A religious man who sought to do the right thing. But beyond that, Joseph doesn't get much ink in the Bible, other than he came from the right family tree, tracing back to Abraham and David, through whom the Messiah would come. He had good genes but there is not much in the gospels that's revelatory about his place in the next 30 or so years of Jesus' life.

That's why I am going to ask you to do things a little bit out of order and turn in your hymnals to #144 and read the words of Thomas Troeger's most insightful and inspiring poem about Joseph. We are going to sing together soon, but I know it is hard to take in the full import of the words to a new hymn while you are trying to sing it, stay in tune, keep your place. So let's

look at these verses now as a way to meditate on Scripture, a sort of midrash, that invites us to imagine things that the Bible doesn't say exactly, but resonate with our own experiences and imagination. Will you read along with me, #144, to see Joseph in perhaps more fullness than we are used to doing.

*The Hands that First Held Mary's Child*

*The hands that first held Mary's child were hard from working wood,  
From boards they sawed and planed and filed and splinters they withstood.  
This day they gripped no tool of steel, they drove no iron nail,  
But cradled from the head to heel our Lord new born and frail.*

*When Joseph marveled at the size of that small breathing frame  
And gazed upon those bright new eyes and spoke the infant's name,  
The angel's words he once had dreamed poured down from heaven's height,  
And like the host of stars that beamed blessed earth with welcome light.*

*"This child shall be Emmanuel, not God upon the throne,  
But God with us, Emmanuel, as close as blood and bone."  
The tiny form in Joseph's palms confirmed what he had heard,  
And from his heart rose hymns and psalms for heaven's human word.*

*The tools which Joseph laid aside a mob would later lift  
And use with anger, fear and pride to crucify God's gift.  
Let us, O Lord, not only hold the child who's born today,  
But charged with faith may we be bold to follow in his way.*

Some kind of father, right? Protecting, guiding, teaching, standing up for what is decent, right and faithful. An ordinary man doing extraordinary things. As you put your hymnals back in the rack, I want to make a side comment.

I think you know me well enough by now to know that I am not a “sexist” kind of person, only valuing one gender over the other. Far from it, I have spent a lot of time and energy avowing the constructive and strong role of women in the home, in the church, in society - our eagerness for partnership and our interdependence. But this morning I decided to follow Matthew’s lead and stick largely with masculine characters who do God’s work in their own way. That said, back to men and fathers.

Joseph was a good father. But there have been other fathers like that, haven’t there? Hopefully, yours was one of them. And we kind of expect, at least we hope, that people have positive things to say about their fathers.

So I wasn’t surprised when a friend of mine began to speak in affectionate and glowing and, or better yet, in reverential terms about her father, Ben Salmon. Father did this... Father did that....What I didn’t figure out until quite recently was that Father was being proposed for canonization, for being named as a saint in the Roman tradition. You see, Ben Salmon has been describes as one of the inspiring Christians of the last century, the American Catholic conscientious objector to World War I. A layman, husband, father, peacemaker and resister, his was a long lonely, steadfast stretch of discipleship to the nonviolent Jesus. Right here in the United States, he stood and said that because of Jesus, he would not be a soldier, arguing that there was no such thing as a just war. He was arrested in January 1918 and subsequently court-martialed, convicted and sentenced to death which was commuted to 25 years hard labor. When he went on a hunger strike, the government claimed that his fast was a symptom of mental illness and sent him to a ward reserved for the “criminally insane.” The hierarchy of his church deserted him and even when Salmon was sick and in prison, priests refused him the Sacraments. Later, with post-war public opinion and UN declarations about the validity of conscientious objections, Salmon was pardoned and released, and given a dishonorable discharge for the military service he never joined. His health damaged by his prison ordeal which included beatings and force-feedings, he died prematurely in 193, but he has been an inspiration for many other people. Agree with his principles and faith stances or not, you must admit he was quite a father. A righteous man called out of ordinary circumstances making an extraordinary witness to the Son born to Mary and Joseph - Jesus, Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace.<sup>1</sup>

Let me tell you another story or two, passing along the words of life because I think these kind of stories give us hope and inspiration in the midst of so many sad and bleak narratives. You probably have never heard of Robert Sanchez – I doubt he is up for canonization. He is currently a social worker, helping people coming out of prison, the same transition he did 16 years ago. He served 15 years in Sing Sing on a nonviolent drug conviction before his release, and he admits it can be hard not to fall into feeling bitter and angry. What saved him then

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and now is the presence of a minister, Fred Davie, who was teaching a course at the prison. Robert feels that Fred gave him new life, telling him that he was going to be OK, being his “iota of light”, giving him new life. Now Robert is passing that encouragement and light on to others who are just getting out of jail and trying to build a new and different future.<sup>2</sup> Jesus insisted that we should not hid our light under a barrel and Robert Sanchez is making that his life work.

That’s what fathers, at their best, do, isn’t it?

Whether it is Joseph of Biblical fame or Fred and Robert of NY state. They are being part of the in-breaking of God’s New Creation which accompanies the birth of Jesus.

Then there is the Rev. Joey Crutcher, a black pastor in Tulsa, OK, whose unarmed son, Terence, was shot dead on the street by a white police officer. This wasn’t the first tragedy in Crutcher’s family. He’d also lost a child to crib death years ago, and another to cancer. In addition, his grandson had been shot dead while driving home from church in a gang hit that was a case of mistaken identity. Such heartbreak! But why do I bring up that story now? Because Joey Crutcher says that he forgives the white policewoman who shot his son and prays for her. He says, “Every night, my wife and I cry because we see our son with his hands up.” The he adds, speaking of the officer who shot him, “She’s got people around her who are hurting too. My heart goes out to her.”

The newspaper journalist who reported on this story called Crutcher “something of a saint”.<sup>3</sup> Maybe, or maybe just an ordinary extraordinary guy doing manly, fatherly, things - as he is bold to follow Jesus. And wherever attitudes and actions of mercy, forgiveness, compassion, reconciliation are found they are part of the Kingdom that the Messiah ushers in and to which we are called to participate in creating and bringing into reality.

So moving on from stories of other people, from Joseph and Robert and Fred and Rev. Crutcher, to our stories – - we have all...each one of us...- experienced upheavals in our lives. Indeed, while some of us today may feeling lots of love, hope, courage and excitement today as we gather so close to Christmas, who knows how many of us are struggling to hold it all together. Discord in the family, disconnection, worry, loss, heartache, frenzy, even fear for the nation or the world. *Maybe in your own soul, but certainly somewhere, many places around you, there will be these feelings.*

And today’s lesson reminds us that God worked through real people with real challenges. As one preacher has written, *God didn’t choose a fairy-tale princess to bear the savior, but rather an unwed peasant girl. He didn’t choose a political or business success story to name and care for Jesus, but rather a man with his own doubts and questions who wanted to do the right thing, but needed angelic guidance to accomplish it.*

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All of this helps flesh out the name Emmanuel that Matthew draws from Isaiah to apply to Jesus. God with us. God REALLY with us. That is, God coming to be with us as we are. Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be, or have promised to be, or will be some day -but with us as we are now...today...in this moment.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps that's the promise at the heart of this passage – that God came before to be with, use, accept, and hallow Mary, yes, but Joseph too, at the birth of Christ, so also God comes to us in Christ to be with us, use us for good, accept us as we are, and hallow us by God's own presence. Us, men and women, young and old, gay and straight, black and white and other shades of skin, rich and poor, carpenters and teachers, parents and children, productive and challenged - - ordinary folks called to extraordinary work; the manly work, the womanly work, the human work, the divine work of helping to bring about the Kingdom. God is with us in this effort, really with us, but we are meant to be part of the action, revelations of God's ever-present love. And may we like Joseph , not only hold the child who's born today, but charged with faith, be bold to follow in his way.

That's good news, my friend, good news.

*May it be so. Amen and amen.*

Sermon by Susan Power Trucksess

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Notes:

1. John Dear, *Ben Salmon and the Army of Peace*, National Catholic Reporter, Feb. 23, 2010.
  2. "In Prison and Outside, He Found his "iota of Light: A Mentor Named Fred," NPR, Morning Edition, December 2, 2016, cited in a sermon by the Rev. *Mary Theiss on 12/11/16.*
  3. Nicholas Kristoff, *Identity Politics and a Dad's Loss*, The New York Times, Dec.8, 2016.
  4. David Lose --- *In the Meantime, Where Faith Meets Everyday Life*, Advent 4, a blog for preachers.
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