

“Not What I Expected”

Matthew 2:13-23

December 29, 2019

Did you get anything for Christmas this year that you did not expect? Did you get anything that you didn't want or would like to take back to the store because it didn't meet your expectations? A little boy was given the part of Joseph in the Christmas program at his church and on the day before Christmas Eve, when the children were supposed to have their program, the boy became sick. His mother was concerned that it was too late to get another child to play Joseph in the program, but the boy reassured his mother that she didn't need to worry. “I don't think anyone will even notice that I'm not there,” said the boy, “because Joseph doesn't have any speaking lines. So it really doesn't matter.”

Do you think there's any truth in the boy's statement about Joseph, “that no one would even notice if Joseph wasn't there?” Would we notice if Joseph was not part of the story of Jesus' birth? When it comes to the Christmas story, we certainly remember Mary's part in it. We could say she had the lead role, and many of the songs we sing focus on Mary and Jesus. When we think of Christmas Eve, we remember the angels who told the shepherds the good news of Jesus' birth, and then how the shepherds went and told people about the baby they saw in the manger. And next Sunday we will remember the visit of the Wise Men who brought gifts to the newborn King. But what about Joseph, is he just part of the background scenery? There are no words of Joseph recorded in the Bible. When an angel appeared to Mary and Elizabeth and Zechariah, they all spoke to the angel, but Joseph just seems to have listened to the message given to him without asking any questions. However, our Gospel reading for today makes it very clear that Joseph did play a very important part in the process of God bringing Jesus into the world.

In the events leading up to our Gospel lesson for today, Joseph demonstrated that he was not only a faithful husband and caring father, but someone who was willing to listen to God and obey Him. After Mary broke the news to him that she was pregnant while maintaining that she was still a virgin, Joseph considered breaking off the engagement quietly. But then he was told by an angel in a dream to keep his engagement to Mary and to take her as his wife. Joseph listened and obeyed. Then the government (under God's control of course) told Joseph to go to Bethlehem with his pregnant wife – about an 80-mile trip. Again he listened and obeyed. After Jesus was born some Wise Men came to worship baby Jesus and gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But as soon as they left, God sent another message to Joseph. In verse 13 it says that God sent an angel to Joseph again in a dream who told him to “take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” As he had done in the past, Joseph put his trust in God's protecting care with a faith that listened and obeyed.

Perhaps we do not fully appreciate how significant it is that Joseph listened and obeyed the messages the angels brought to him from God. First, in verse 13, Joseph was told to take his wife and her young son to a strange land, that being Egypt, where he had no job or home. Then after he was settled in Egypt for a while, an angel appeared again to him with another message. In verse 20, after Herod died, an angel told Joseph to “take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.” So he took his wife and son and headed to Israel. But then, in verses 22-23, he was warned in another dream not to go to Israel. So he took baby Jesus and Mary and went to a town called Nazareth and settled there so the Scriptures would be fulfilled.

Four times, 3 in this text alone, Joseph received commands from God in a dream that probably didn't make a lot of sense. And each time Joseph could easily have said to God, “Now wait a minute this is not what I expected when I became engaged to Mary. I didn't ask to be the foster father of the Christ child. I don't think it's fair that I have to keep moving from place to place. You're going to have to take care of Herod, God, because I'm not going down to Egypt.” But we don't hear anything like that from Joseph. Instead, he trusted in God's protecting care and listened with a faith that obeyed.

While we may not receive any messages from angels in our dreams, we do have the Words of God printed in the Bible in our own language. And in the Bible God tells us how to avoid things that would hurt us. On the pages of Scripture there are warnings about everything from adultery to alcoholism to greed and to gossip. When we have a faith that listens to God's warnings and obeys His Word, we are kept under God's protective care. Now, that does not necessarily mean that life will be easy for us, as it certainly wasn't easy for Joseph as

he traveled to different cities and countries until he finally arrived home. But we are all on our way home, to our heavenly home, that Jesus has prepared for us. While we would certainly prefer the smoothest, easiest, and most direct way, that's not how life was for Jesus and we should not expect better treatment than Jesus received.

We all know that the Christian life involves suffering and setbacks. However, suffering is often wrongly seen only as a sign of God's angry judgment upon us. Suffering can be a blessing in disguise, a sign of unity with Christ, or a mark of God's love. Our Gospel lesson shows that persecution and suffering are part of the Christian life, just as they were for the sinless baby Jesus. God sent the holy family home to Nazareth in a way they didn't expect, not to punish them, but to help and protect them. And so it may also be with us.

Our lives may not always go as planned. We or someone in our family may experience a sudden illness – like cancer – or a loss of employment or some kind of tragedy. Instead of easy living, we may find ourselves frightened, confused, or even lost, all because we live in a fallen world. The same devil who hated Jesus, hates us as believers in Jesus. The same sinful world that did not know Jesus, does not know us and cannot understand how we can believe in a God who came to this earth as a helpless baby.

But God is leading us home. It may not be the way we would necessarily choose, as God leads us over mountains and into valleys, with joys and sorrows. This is not because He is angry with us. Just the opposite, He loves us as He loves His own Son. Unfortunately, God does not eliminate all the evil that we may face, just as He did not eliminate King Herod on the spot and prevent him from killing all of those innocent baby boys in his search for Jesus. However, He does warn us to flee from sin and evil, and He constantly calls us home through His Word of love and forgiveness.

We don't know exactly how long Joseph, Mary, and Jesus remained in Egypt, but someone had to die before they could return home to Nazareth. Our Gospel lesson tells us that once King Herod died, Joseph was informed by God that he could now go home. Well, someone had to die before we could travel home, and that someone was Jesus. He paved the way for us by doing everything necessary, including dying on a cross, so we could have an eternal home in heaven.

Has your life taken an unexpected detour this year? Is it not going as you had planned? Do you find yourself riding on a rough road of suffering, sacrifice, or trials? Do you feel as if you are traveling alone down a deserted highway, not knowing where exactly you will end up? If you are, then learn from the example of baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, because such is the way of all who follow our loving God in this sinful world. The Christian path, while it is filled with many joys, also involves hardship and sacrifice as well. When your road in life seems to take a turn for the worse, do not listen to the devil's foolish words that God has abandoned you. God led Jesus, Mary, and Joseph home another way to protect, help, and save them; and He leads us in ways that we may not have expected for the same reasons. Perhaps the little boy who thought no one would miss Joseph in the Christmas program had a valid point. Joseph does seem to be the one who gets overlooked at Christmas. But Joseph stands out as a shining example of one who listened to God's commands and obeyed them – even when God's commands were not what he expected. May God's Word work in all of us a faith like Joseph's that listens and obeys all of God's commands without questions as we prepare for a new year.