

Presbyterian Church of Stanley
14895 Antioch Road
Overland Park, KS 66221
913-681-8180 / www.stanleypres.org

“Joseph the Jolted” Sermon Series: “Four Christmas Stories”

Sunday, December 23, 2007©

Eric Laverentz, Senior Pastor

Scripture Lesson: *Matthew 1:18-25*

When we look over our life story or we listen to someone else’s story, it is usually not the events we expect which form the core of our story. It is the unexpected, the unanticipated, the unplanned. Sometimes these surprises are pleasant. I was surprised when someone’s suggestion that I call their neighbor’s babysitter Jen for a date, turned out to be a pretty good suggestion. Sometimes, these surprises are not so pleasant. They are in fact jolting—a phone call in the middle of the night, a visit from Human Resources, a cough which just won’t seem to go away, a registered letter, a policeman at our front door. Surprises like these often end up comprising significant parts of our story. In this broken world, they are unavoidable. The question is what do we do with them? We remember God’s promises. Let us pray.

Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth, was building a bed for a wealthy man in Dan who was betrothed to a woman there. The late August heat was stifling. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he got up to drink some water from the cistern. As he scooped the water out with the ladle, he thought with a smile about his own soon to be wife. Before long she would return from her stay with cousins in Jerusalem. He was excited to see her again.

Joseph was a humble and pious man, not given to great displays, and well respected in the community. It was well known that he was the direct descendant of the great King David, his great-great-grandson. He carried

himself with a bit of an air dignity. Even twenty-eight generations later, the royal blood still ran in his veins.

As Joseph dipped the ladle into the cistern to retrieve the cool, clear water, he noticed his friend Elidad standing at the door of his workshop. Not stopping from lifting the ladle to his lips, Joseph greeted his old friend. “Elidad, how are you this hot day?” he said. Stepping into the workshop, Elidad said, “I am fine, my friend. The Lord has blessed me. “Has he blessed you enough that you have come to pay me for the table I built for you at Passover?” Joseph said with a smile.

“I am sorry I am not here to do business, my friend,” Elidad said. “You have not heard the rumor running through Nazareth?” Joseph made it a point to avoid the local gossip and he was not surprised that he had not. “What concern is the gutter talk to me?” he said.

Elidad looked at Joseph hard, “My friend, this gossip is of great concern to you. For it involves the reason for Mary’s stay in Jerusalem. She did not go there to assist her cousin Elizabeth in her pregnancy as we have supposed. Mary herself is with child.”

Elidad went on to explain that the word had come from Jerusalem that the young girl Mary was in the fifth month of her pregnancy. Her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Eli the priest were aware of this and protecting her. For the law stated that if a betrothed woman was found to have been

with a man, that she was to be taken to the gates of the city and stoned. “I am sorry, my friend, to be the bearer of this news. I would not choose this task,” Elidad said.

Some two millennium later, a woman named Anna wandered through a shopping mall, going in and out of stores trying to complete a list of Christmas presents for family and friends. As she navigated through the crowds and interacted with overworked and underpaid employees, she could feel her own patience wear thin. Riding up the escalator, one of many her overstuffed bags broke open and out tumbled four books which she had picked up off the clearance table. Two of the books went bouncing down the moving steel steps, finally landing with a thud on the toes of small child who began to scream as if they had been struck with an axe. Anna scrambled to pick up the books before they were mangled beyond repair by the great steel beast and the dozens of shoes and boots made sloppy from the December slush. As the mother of the wounded child, stepped past Anna, the wailing waif now scooped up safely into her arms, Anna apologized for the accident. “When my arms are so full I usually just take my packages to the car,” the woman said coolly. Anna’s shoulders slumped as she grabbed the last wayward hardback and stuffed it into another sack.

Joseph was not one who was prone to rash decisions. He kept working as he pondered this terrible news over many days. He wondered if the Lord was punishing him. Joseph’s first wife had died several years before, leaving him with four children.¹ He thought of how his great-grandfathers had failed as Kings of Judah. How they had not listened to the Word of the Lord, took foreign wives, sold the treasures of the temple to bribe other nations, led their people into disastrous wars, and worshipped foreign gods, even burning their own children as sacrifices. Joseph often thought about the words repeated time and time again in the Torah, the books of Moses, “I the Lord am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children.” He labored under the yoke of being descended from kings. His forefathers had led God’s people into exile and slavery under the Chaldeans and afterward the Persians. They were then conquered by the Greeks,

then the Egyptians, and afterward the Syrians and now they were ruled by the Romans. Every time Joseph held in his hand a Roman coin bearing the image of Caesar he felt the weight of his family’s failure.

Joseph simply could not believe this turn of events. It just seemed otherworldly, like God had reached down into his life and crafted these desperate circumstances with His own two hands, just as He had formed Adam from the soil. Standing outside his workshop as the sun set over the hills to the west, Joseph thought of the words from the Psalmist, “*For the Lord is a great God. And a great King above all gods. In his hands are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.*” *Psalm 95:3-4* And he prayed out loud, “Is this your plan, Lord? Have not I already received a double portion for my family’s sins? Will I not have peace?” There was no answer.

After the escalator debacle, Anna thought to herself that she needed sit down in the food court and get a drink—the stiffest kind of drink one could find at a mall food court. She found a table in the corner and sipped a vanilla Dr. Pepper and wondered just what escalators and bags and credit cards and cutting remarks had to do with Jesus Christ. The thought surprised her because she had actually not thought or said the name Jesus in some time. And she wondered from just where that impulse had sprung because it leapt into her spirit so suddenly, like an uninvited, but not unwelcome guest. Life had become so busy for her, so full that she had not paused to fill her mind or spirit with any good thing for a very long time. She was startled at how even thinking on that name for even a few moments felt good. The very thought of Jesus was like living water to her dry and dusty soul. It felt so good that she said His name out loud. The name poured over her lips like a praise, “Jesus Christ...Jesus Christ...Jesus Christ,” she said again and again and again. And sitting in the middle of the food court, she smiled a smile which radiated through her entire being as she thought that even here, in the middle of a mall food court, frustrated and tired and nearly spent that Jesus Christ would be with her. And she thought this is truly what Christmas means—God’s promise to be with us anywhere and everywhere.

Joseph had not slept well since Elidad had visited him with the terrible news. He had slept somewhat better since his decision to not follow the letter of the law, but simply to end their betrothment quietly. But even now the sleep came in fits and starts and he was plagued with dark and terrible dreams. He dreamt of the life which he once believed he was to have with Mary. He dreamed of the distant past, of the misdeeds of his kingly ancestors. He saw Solomon and Rehoboam and Manasseh and Zedekiah and Ahaz shattering the two tablets of God's law. And he dreamed of God's people bound in chains, imprisoned, their eyes blinded and shut as they sat in an impenetrable darkness and gloom.

But as the eye of Joseph's mind peered into that dark place, he suddenly saw in his slumber a light. It was faint at first but steadily grew stronger and brighter and soon it was as blazed as brilliantly as a hundred noonday suns and his head turned and his eyes squinted involuntarily in his sleep. And from that light he heard a voice, a voice which roared like the crash of the waves along the sea but was at once as gentle as a late afternoon breeze. And the voice said, "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" *Matthew 1:20-21* And as quickly as the light and the voice came, they were gone. And Joseph woke up hearing only the sounds of night. He rose from his bed and walked outside in time to see the rosy fingered dawn began to creep over the horizon. He wondered just what this dream meant. The Messiah would be born of God and a woman? Such a thing was impossible! God is distant, holy, other—to say His name was prohibited, to look upon Him was death. Only the High Priest and on just one day a year, was allowed into God's presence in the temple and only that was to make sacrifice for the sins of the people. And now his dream had told him that God and humanity were to be inseparably joined in an infant child. God and man dwelling together? Such a thing had not occurred since the Garden of Eden. "How could this be?" he said out loud. More than that he wondered in his heart, "Is it true?"

Needing to get home, Anna finally ended her time of prayer and praise in the mall food court. She had been so busy picking up books from the escalator and the food court was noisy that she had failed to notice the beeping of her cell phone telling her she had a voicemail. She let it keep beeping as she gathered her bags and got up to leave to go to the car. After she loaded the bags in the trunk and settled in the driver's seat, she dialed her voicemail and lifted the cell phone to her ear. It was the principal from her daughter's school. Her daughter had been on a field trip that day to see the Nutcracker. On the way back to the school, the bus in which the twenty-three or so children plus their teacher, hit a patch of ice, skidded through an intersection, and was hit by a speeding truck. The bus flipped over and several children were very badly injured including her daughter. They were all rushed to the local hospital. Anna immediately turned over the engine and sped toward the hospital. As she went she asked God, "You could be with me in a mall food court. Why could you not be with my little girl on the school bus?! I thought Christmas meant you promised to be with us, God!" she shouted as she pressed the gas pedal down hard against the floor of the car.

That following Saturday, seeking God, Joseph traveled to the synagogue. His mind was still spinning and his heart burdened. As he sat among the men, he could feel a hundred pair of eyes bearing down upon him. Each hushed whisper cut him like blade as they heaped scorn upon his seemingly unfaithful betrothed and his ragged house. The rabbi rose and stood tall to read from the Word of God. He unrolled the scroll from its spools and began, "A reading from the prophet Isaiah, a word of promise delivered but not received to that most wicked of kings Ahaz." Joseph's heart sunk as he felt the shame of generations heaped upon his family. "700 years ago," Joseph thought to himself, "was Ahaz's evil rule. Is God yet done punishing us for our sins?" The priest's voice boomed through the synagogue, "Hear then o house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call His name Immanuel."

Joseph's eyes grew wide as he heard the Word of God. And in a flash he realized who he was and what he was for and that he was not cursed by God, but favored, favored to help restore the throne of his family and raise God's only Son as his own. And he jumped to his feet and he shouted, "Immanuel, Immanuel—that means God with us! God with us!" The entire synagogue stared, "God with us! A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and he shall save his people from their sins! And he shall sit on the throne of his father David and of his kingdom there will be no end. The Lord keeps His promises!" Not only did Joseph realize who he was and what he was for—but as looked at the stunned faces surrounding, he also realized where he was. "Please continue Rabbi," he said as he sat down. And Joseph listened to the Word of God and the rabbi's teaching, praising and thanking the Lord in his heart for keeping his promises.

When Anna finally arrived at the hospital, she ran to the room and saw her little girl lying asleep in her hospital bed. Her face had been cut and bruised in several places. She had broken her ribs. She had a concussion. Her arm was broken in several places and would require surgery to be put back together properly. The despondent mother fell down at the side of her daughter's bed and wept as she lay her head on the blankets.

The little girl woke up. "Why are you crying Mommy?" she asked. Anna said "I'm crying because you are hurt, baby, and I wasn't there for you." "That's okay Mommy," the little girl replied, perfectly calm, "Jesus was with me." Stunned by her daughter's confession, Anna said "I know, honey, He

is with everybody. He's with your Daddy too and your sister and me." "No Mommy," the daughter said, "He was with me. He was with me in the ambulance and he was sitting in that chair right over there," she said pointing to the green chair across the room. "He just left because He said you were coming and He had other children He had to go see." Anna, like Joseph, praised and thanked God in her heart for keeping his promises.

So when we look over the story of our life, it's usually not the events we expect which form the core of our story. It's the unexpected, the unanticipated, the unplanned. What do we do, when the circumstances of this world jolt us? We remember God's promises—most of all His promise in Jesus Christ to be with us. Amen.

ⁱ Early Church legend taught that Joseph was very advanced in age, married previously and that his wife died, leaving him with four grown children when he married Mary.