

# When Joseph Stood Beside the Newborn Luke 2:1-20

**Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs  
Salem United Church of Christ  
December 24, 2010**

*So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. Lk. 2:16*

One of the most prominent persons in the Christmas story has no speaking part anywhere in scripture. Joseph stands faithfully beside Mary and the newborn Christ, but not a single word from his lips is recorded in the Bible. Like many another strong man, he comes across as the silent type, and seems to let his wife do the talking for both of them. Still, there must have been something going through Joseph's mind after the baby was born. Tonight we can try to imagine what it might have been.

### *All he would show Jesus*

Joseph might have been thinking of all he would show Jesus as they lived life together. He would tell him – wouldn't he? – about his trade, about his work as a carpenter. He would tell him about how to use and care for each one of the tools. He would teach him how to tell one kind of wood from another, and about which kind was best for which project. He would tell him about the work of a carpenter, about its joys and its frustrations.

Along with thinking about all he would teach Jesus about carpentry and the carpenter's shop, he might have been thinking what he would teach Jesus about the village of Nazareth where they would live. Who were the characters who came into the shop? Who were the neighbors who lived nearby? Who could be trusted? Who couldn't? Who had to be treated with kid gloves, and who could take a good-natured ribbing and give as good as they took? Who would Jesus have to watch out for, and who would watch out for him? There are a million things a father can teach his son about their village. Joseph must have been thinking of at least some of them.

We can suspect, too, he might have been thinking about the family, and what Jesus would need to know about them. That was quite a bunch! There was Zechariah, an old cousin by marriage on Mary's side who couldn't talk for a while. In time, there would be a peculiar cousin named John, nicknamed the Baptist, who preferred the

rugged wilderness to society, and two other cousins – James and John – nicknamed “sons of thunder.” We can only guess why they were so named. And these were only a few of the relatives. There was a whole family to introduce Jesus to, and you know how family is.

Time for recreation may not have been as plentiful then as it is now, but Joseph may have had that on his mind, too. He would teach Jesus how to hunt and to fish, how to relax as well as to work.

Do you see what I am getting at? Do you see what I am imagining? Joseph was anxious as any first-time father to teach Jesus all about what his life was like. Here and now, as we stand before the newborn Christ, we have the same opportunities. Christmas comes as a gift, giving us one with whom we can share each and every detail of our lives. What is prayer but the opportunity to tell Jesus what life is like for us? In prayer we can tell him all our thoughts and feelings about work, home life, friendships, joys, sorrows, successes, failures, and frustrations. Prayer gives us Joseph’s opportunity to be with Jesus every day and share life with him in all its wholeness and brokenness.

#### *All he would bequeath to Jesus*

We can go beyond this and see that Joseph was imagining more than what he would show Jesus. He might have been imagining, too, all he would one day bequeath to Jesus.

Joseph knew the culture of their day was one of primogeniture, meaning that the expectation was that the first born son would inherit everything. When Joseph looked into Christ’s crib, he was seeing the person to whom he would one day turn over everything he had and worked for. By rule of primogeniture, Jesus, the first born, would inherit the carpenter’s shop, all its tools and all its assets. If Joseph had any savings, they would go to Jesus, too. Likewise, as the eldest, Jesus would come to be responsible for the care of Mary in her old age. So Jesus was not only one to whom Joseph could tell everything; he was the one to whom Joseph would turn over everything.

You see where I am going with this, too. The parallel is not at all hidden. Christians are persons who turn their lives over to Jesus. It is not that anything is taken away; it’s that everything is surrendered to Christ’s Lordship and use.

Elizabeth Stolt was a resident of the nursing home where I worked as a student chaplain years ago. She was a small lady. She walked with a walker. Her dentures moved freely in her mouth as she

spoke. But, my, could she sing! She sang solos in our chapel services and the ceiling moved. She told me she only sang in church. The good Lord gave her her voice, she said, and she dedicated it to God's service.

A couple had a lakeside home. They enjoyed it day in and day out. But they looked for opportunities to open it to others. God had given it to them, they felt, and they dedicated it to God's use and not just their own.

This is what Christians do. None of us do it perfectly. But, when we are at our best, we try. We look to the child of the manger, to the man of the cross, and say, "Lord Jesus, what is mine is yours to do with as you please; I dedicate it all to you." This is the Christian act of surrender, and, strange to tell, it is the way to find life.

#### *All his fears about Jesus*

But perhaps we have not yet hit on the main thing Joseph was thinking. We have said he was thinking of all he would show Jesus and all he would give Jesus. Foremost in his mind, though, he may have been thinking of all his fears about Jesus.

Late one summer night, a first time father went home from St. Anthony Hospital in Rockford and put the notice IT'S A GIRL! on the church's outdoor sign on the corner. He went to bed not knowing what he was in for, but thrilled and frightened at the same time.

Feelings almost exactly like these, only heightened, must have been Joseph's. If Matthew is right in telling us that Joseph knew from the beginning that Mary's child was the Son of God, then he must have felt a terrible weight upon his shoulders. He had never been a father before, and no one had ever been the father of the Son of God before. Would he know what to do? Would he be adequate for the task?

Being the just and righteous man we are told he was, he must have answered his own question as soon as he asked it. Was he adequate for the task of receiving as his own the Son of God? No! Did he deserve to receive the honor and responsibility being given him at the birth of Jesus? No! All along the way, through question after question, Joseph must have sized himself up and saw a future he was way too small for.

But maybe just then, as he thought those thoughts, he heard again the angel's words, words he had heard in a dream. "Do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife." The corollary is, "Don't be afraid

to take Jesus as your son." It was a word of acceptance, a word of grace, a word of encouragement. Joseph would never read Paul's words that we have treasure in earthen vessels and that God chooses what is weak, but he knew them. He would never sing the hymn that says God uses our weakness to magnify divine power, but he knew the tune. He knew the grace of being blessed with and by the presence of the glory of Christ in spite of all his own weakness and inadequacy.

Of course, you see where this is leading, too. We aren't worthy to receive Christ, not at Christmas or at anytime. But he comes to us. He comes to us not because we are worthy but because we aren't. That is not to say we are scoundrels. Of course not. But it is to acknowledge that we are never as much as we want to be. That makes no difference to God. Where we see less, God sees more. And Christ comes to you, and you can do something with him.

My mother kept a diary the early years of her marriage. It stops years before I was born, but my brothers are there, my oldest brother who was stillborn and the brother with whom I lived and laughed and fought and played. The diary says that the whole week after my brother who lived was born my father filled silo. I wonder what went through his mind then. No doubt extra reason to be careful was at the forefront. But I suspect there was more. A year and a half earlier, immediately after the stillbirth of my oldest brother, according the diary, my father planted corn. I wonder if those corn rows were crooked for having been planted with tears and with the man on the tractor, every round or so, getting lost in prayer. However those May acres of 1950 were planted, that September silo of 1951 was filled with joy and glad thanksgiving. As he brought the green bundles in from the field and fed them carefully into the filler, he must have thought of the bundle still at the hospital, and of all he wanted to show Paul, to give him, and to be for him. He must have hoped he would be good enough.

Likewise, Joseph must have stood beside the newborn Christ and thought of the life he wanted to share with him, the life he would dedicate to him, and the kind of father he would try to be.

That is your opportunity tonight. You are standing, as it were, beside the manger. Tell Jesus everything about your life. Show him all that's in your heart. All you have to do is stand before the manger. Christ will do the looking. Christ will do the understanding. Above all, he will do the accepting. Then and there, in his love, commit yourself

to him. You won't lose anything worth keeping, but you will gain everything worth having.