

Mary and Joseph and Travels to Christmas
Matthew 2:18-25

What's your favorite Christmas memory? If you're like me, they are too numerous to mention. The time the cat climbed the tree. Christmas Eve services and it begins to snow on the way home. Coke waiting for us. Gathered by the fire as my father read Miracle on 34th Street. The first year Eric A. played with the toys instead of the boxes. Interesting that it is the times, not the gifts, that linger long in my memory.

For all the stresses of Christmas, for all we bemoan the commercialization of Christmas, as we flock to the WalMart or visit site after internet site, for all the family pain that can be magnified at Christmas, yet year after year Christmas beckons us to draw near.

If Easter is the holiday of the intellect, then Christmas is the holiday of the heart. At Easter we speak of the important theological concepts of our faith: redemption, resurrection, eternal life.

But Christmas. Christmas touches our heart. The enormity and eternity of God made known in a baby. Call him what you want. Lord, Savior, King of Kings, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, but at Christmas he is a baby. And in that baby, we begin to learn something of God's ultimate relationship with his people. Loving, vulnerable, yet filled with hope, filled with promise.

And this priceless gift, this divine treasure, is entrusted to a mother and a father, Mary and Joseph, ordinary in every way except the most important way: their faith in God.

Have you ever noticed that there is nothing at all miraculous about the birth of Jesus? Did you notice Matthew doesn't even describe the birth except by noting that Mary and Joseph were not physically intimate until after his birth. Nothing whatsoever miraculous about his birth?

You want to object: But Mary was a virgin. Yes, but that speaks of his conception, not his birth. And Joseph listened to the angel and was not afraid to take Mary as his wife. True enough. But that was before Jesus' birth, and after. Shepherds would hear an angel chorus and later Wise Men would see a star to guide them to the child, but these miracles simply surround the birth and help to give it meaning.

But Jesus? Nothing miraculous or magical about his birth itself. We have to look to Luke to tell us what few details we know: He is born like the rest of us, and in a humbler way than most: in a stable out back of an inn, in a town to which in all likelihood Joseph and Mary had never traveled before, a town ninety miles from home. So for all the miracles before his birth and after, in his birth Jesus is born into the everyday potential and peril of creation and humanity itself.

Jesus is not an angel, floating above our promise and turmoil. No, he is one of us, born into the center of your life and my life, indeed into the hopes and fears, and promises of every life. He is born into life the way life is, without, as it were, any divine safety net. And so God entrusts this baby to

what every baby is entrusted to, Mary and Joseph. And, not surprisingly, God chose well.

Mary and Joseph. Neither one famous. Neither one expecting to play a part in the drama of salvation. Both from a small town that lived in the shadows of a major Pagan City, overlooked by the dominant culture of its day. Joseph, a technon, which can mean skilled craftsman or stone mason or wood worker. Or it can mean day laborer. None of the Gospel writers know much about him or even what he actually did for a living. So they called him a technon, which pretty much would cover all the bases. We do know this: he wasn't wealthy or famous. And he just sort of fades away from the Biblical narrative. We don't know how or where or when he died.

And Mary. We know just as little about her. We don't know about her family. We assume she was young, because folks back then married young and most died young. Today we call her the Virgin Mary or the Blessed Virgin, but these are holy titles bestowed upon her by history. Back then she was just Mary.

So why are they so important to the Christmas story? Because they both had hearts that trusted God. And both dared to be obedient to God. Let's think back to the first parents: Adam and Eve. Their lasting legacy is one of disobedience and of breaking God's heart.

But now Mary and Joseph, the first parents, in stature though not chronologically, of the New Testament. If Adam and Eve represent humanity at its disobedient worst, Mary and Joseph represent humanity at our obedient best. Mary faithfully accepts her calling to be the mother of the savior

despite the difficulties it will bring upon her.

And Joseph. When we first meet him he seems to be conventionally righteous, but with a good heart. His wife to be expecting, and instead of a public spectacle of stoning her or at the very least the public ridicule of a divorce for all to see her shame, Joseph proves himself to be more than conventionally righteous: his righteousness go beyond convention straight to the heart of God.

Joseph is one who dares to listen to the angel's whisper. Joseph has a heart that is able to trust God's leading. Joseph has a heart that is able to think the best of Mary.

Mary and Joseph are not just two heroes of the faith. They are representative of humanity itself, of you and me at our best, when we dare to listen to God instead of the crowd.

In Mary and Joseph, God again takes a chance on us, on humanity. Adam and Eve symbolize our dark detours into disobedience, but Mary and Joseph remind us that indeed, God still dares to entrust the things of God to his people.

The birth of Jesus relies not on God's coercive power, but on our faithful obedience. Miracle and star and angel voices are not enough to assure Jesus' birth and growth. No, God entrusted Jesus and his message, his ministry, to us, to humanity itself, of which Mary and Joseph shine bright as examples of who we are at our best.

Faithful. Obedient. Daring to risk a new journey, because it is God who has done the calling.

So what's the big deal about Christmas? It's a celebration of faithfulness. God faithful to us and humanity faithful to God.

It's a celebration of promise. That God can reach into the everyday, the ordinary, touch it with His love, and make it never the same again.

Jesus was indeed born two thousand years ago, but we travel to Christmas every year because the truth of Christmas endures in every generation and every heart. Christmas invites us again to believe that there is still wonder and potential in this world. That just when we expect it least, God is ready to step in to offer new hope, new promise, new vision. To hold a baby is to hold the future in our hands. To hold a baby is to know again the wonder of love. To hold a baby is to dare to believe in a future that is bright and beautiful.

And finally, Christmas reminds us that sometimes what is most important to God comes to us in packages that are small and vulnerable. This King of Kings and Lord of Lords is born as a helpless baby, who has no hope of surviving, except for the love and faithfulness of Mary and Joseph.

As we look again at Mary and Joseph, ordinary in so many ways, yet extraordinary in their faith, their obedience, we celebrate that they were faithful in their calling to protect and nurture God's most profound gift to humanity.

And just maybe we realize again that our calling is not unlike that of Mary and Joseph: to realize that what is important to God is even today sometimes vulnerable and in danger of destruction. And to realize again our calling, like that of Mary and Joseph, to protect that which belongs to God, and to give it growth.

Mary and Joseph were called to give birth to, and protect, and help grow God's son. And our calling today is to give birth to, and protect, and to help grow in our generation the purposes for which God's son was born: stuff like mercy and unconditional love, and forgiveness which leads to new life.

Christmas is a holiday of the heart. It celebrates birth and hope. It calls us to sing and rejoice. It reminds us again that even in the ordinary, like Mary and Joseph and shepherds and little towns like Nazareth and Bethlehem and Beaufort and across to Morehead City and heading Down East, and everywhere else, there is again the potential for God's merciful and reconciling love to be born again into the world. And that our obedient hearts can bring it to pass.

And like Mary and Joseph before us, as we contemplate God's wondrous work, as our hearts melt again to behold a little baby, we dare to believe again in what tomorrow might bring, because when we travel to Christmas we realize again what God has already done. Amen.