

Today, we continue our journey towards Christmas. We're preparing for the coming of Jesus and taking a closer look at those who were involved in the very first Christmas; those who were seeking Christ and those whom God had sought out, to be a part of God's story.

Last week, we considered those that were present, the angel Gabriel and his connection with Mary, the message that he had for her. Next week, we'll consider those who were considered on the outside, the outsiders, the shepherds, who were the very first to hear about the birth of Christ. The week after that, those that sought Jesus, the seekers, the Magi, the wise ones, who were looking for the Christ child. And finally, on candlelight, Christmas Eve, the birth of Jesus, celebrating with candlelight, with Holy Communion, and the coming of Christ again, to the world.

Today, we take a closer look at two characters in this story who are most humble, Mary and Joseph.

Last week, we remembered that Mary had heard the news that she was pregnant from the angel Gabriel. And it's likely that as a faithful Jewish person at the time, that she would have known that there was prophecies that were foretelling the birth of one who would make a difference in the life of their people, the Messiah. They'd been looking forward to the Messiah for hundreds of years. One of the scriptures that foretold the coming of the Messiah is in Isaiah, Chapter 7, verse 14. It says this: Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant, and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now, Mary may have had these things in mind. The angel had told her that she was pregnant, but do you think that she thought she was the one for this prophecy, that she was the one that would fulfill the longing of the people of Israel for hundreds of years? It was clear, perhaps, that she'd been set apart and chosen by God. The angel told her that, and yet, did she know who this child would be? This longing of the people for a long time was coming, and it may have been for her, and yet she receives the news so humbly. I am God's servant, let it be with me just as you have said.

I think, what a response to this news from the angel, not only that you're pregnant by some miraculous means, but also, that this child is going to be special, a particular child, God's son. Now, we've heard this story over and over, she's in the Bible, of course, I mean, what else is Mary going to say? I think that she might have responded in different ways.

Imagine if something like that happened today. Imagine a young couple, living here in the community, and an angel comes to visit them. Let's just say that they're already pregnant, that they're expecting a child, and they hear a message about this child. Let's make it easier than that. They've gone to give birth, they're up at the hospital, they're at Stormont Vail, they've given birth to a baby and an angel shows up and said, "This child is someone special. They are going to be a star. They are going to lead hundreds and thousands of people. They're going to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. They're going to be a sports star. They're going to be a virtuoso at music." I don't know, any one of those. You might get a little bit excited, right?

I mean, Mary might say, "That's fantastic, so good to hear that." Maybe you tell someone about it, maybe brag, at least a little bit, if you felt that these things were certain to come true. And yet, Mary doesn't say any of these things. She says, "God, I'm yours. Put me to whatever you will. Use me, to be a part of your story."

Not long after that, Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also expecting a child. And her cousin, Elizabeth, confirms the news that, indeed, this child is someone special. This will be someone that will lead our people. And her response isn't, that's old news, Elizabeth, I've already seen an angel, thanks. She doesn't say that. Of course, it should be me, I've been faithful my whole life. She doesn't say that.

Instead, in response to Elizabeth, she sings a praise to God, a song of praise, that you may know as the Magnificat. Mary says, "With all my heart, I glorify the Lord. In the depths of who I am, I rejoice in God, the Savior." This is Mary's response to this incredible news of a child that she was going to birth. Mary is one of the humble.

That brings us to the story of Joseph, and the text that was read, just a few moments ago. I want to remind you, first, about the circumstances for Mary and Joseph. We learned last week that women were engaged to be married when they were 12, 13 or 14. As soon as they were able to have children, they were engaged to be married. At that time, there was a formal ceremony of engagement, and it was one year later when they would be married. During that time, they were husband and wife, they were connected, but they were not living together. Some other translations call this being betrothed, that may be language that you're familiar with. Then, there would be an official wedding.

The men at that time, perhaps boys, 14, 15 or 16, they were teenagers. Whenever they were able to sustain their supportive family with their career, they were engaged, probably the career that they learned from their father and his father before that. So it's likely that Mary and Joseph were early teenagers when they were engaged.

But then came the day when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, and he is not the father. Let me read those verses again and remind you of what that scripture says. This is how the birth of Jesus took place. When Mary, his mother, was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

I read those sentences and I think, really, is that all that happened? Is that how it happened, just this, and then this, and then this? The first word we hear about Joseph is that he is a righteous man and he just found out that his wife, to-be wife is pregnant and it's not him? Do you think, maybe, he responded a little bit more than that? I like to think that there's more than what is recorded, here, a lot that happens between these sentences, here, in verse 18 and 19.

Here is a young man, who is engaged to be married. He's found out that his to-be wife is pregnant. It's not his kid, maybe feeling like the wheels are coming off his life. I may have been planning for this for a long time, I've been looking forward to this, anticipating this, and this is not how things are supposed to go, not how things are supposed to go. Angry, jealous, frustrated, afraid, most likely hurt and wounded, what do you think Joseph was feeling at this news? All of these emotions, and more, perhaps, running through his mind. He has decided that he's not going to expose her publicly, so that she won't be stoned to death. He's a good man, he's not going to do that. But I imagine his heart is broken. What's he going to do?

Joseph's life is interesting, because we know so little about it. Oftentimes, we believe that Joseph was a young man, but we don't know that for certain. The scriptures don't tell us. We know that young people got married, in those days. As United Methodists, and Protestants, usually we like to say that young

people were married at that time, so we think of Mary and Joseph as young teenagers. But other Christian traditions, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches hold that there was a much older Joseph.

This story began in the early centuries of the church, but first, a picture of a young Joseph. This is from the 2006 movie, *The Nativity Story*. It's Joseph and Mary here, and these are young people. Joseph, probably not 13 or 14 here, he's got a pretty good beard, but maybe 18 or 19, clearly a young man here. And Mary, clearly young in this portrayal, as well as Joseph, a young Joseph.

As I said, in the early second century, a tradition began to arise, as Christians were filling in the details of the New Testament. So they used their imaginations. By now, the thinking was that Mary was holy and she was never intimate with a man. Yet, we read in the New Testament that Jesus had brothers and sisters, so how were those things to go together? The tradition became, that you solved this, was that Joseph was a widower. He had children by a previous wife, and that he was an older man. When he married Mary, he married her not in any way anticipating being intimate with her, but perhaps as one that might care for her.

By the year 150, the thought was that Joseph was, perhaps, in his '90s, and that he lived to be over 100, so that he lived until Jesus was 18. And in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, you might see a portrait of Joseph that looks a little bit more like this, [inaudible 00:09:50] art, by Guido Reni, a picture of an older Joseph, holding the infant, Jesus Christ. The truth is, we don't know. When you go home today, if you have a nativity set, you can know if it's a Protestant or a Roman Catholic church, nativity set, by how old Joseph is depicted in it.

One of the things that we do know about Joseph is that he was a tekton. This is a Greek word that means carpenter. You recognize the word tekton, perhaps, from one of the ways we might use it today. It's one of the roots of the word architect. In architect, you have two words, archi and tekton. Archi means one that's over other people, so you think of an archangel as an angel that's above all other angels. And an architect, as a builder that's over all other builders, a master builder, perhaps. But Joseph wasn't an architect. He was a tekton, a woodworker.

In those days, you didn't build houses out of wood. There weren't very many trees in the Holy Land, and olive trees, those that were there, it wasn't common to build houses out of them. This means that Joseph, perhaps, built doors for houses, maybe farm implements to use in the field, and repaired them. This is what a carpenter would have done in his day. Especially then, everything that a carpenter had to do their job was in their toolbox. You might picture that. Farmers, of course, at that time, had land, they had fields, they had crops. Shepherds had sheep, they had some assets for them. But what did the tekton have, what did Joseph have? He had his two hands and his box of tools. That's all he had to sustain his family. Everything that he possessed, his way to make living, fit into a box. It's likely that he worked hard to make a living.

And this is the person that God chose, a tekton, a humble and simple man. Joseph is never again mentioned in the New Testament, after Jesus turns 12. He doesn't even get any lines. Mary gets lines in the story, Joseph doesn't say anything. We don't hear him say any words in the scriptures. He doesn't get a lot of recognition. In fact, in some traditions, he's the patron saint of those that serve God quietly, without anybody ever noticing.

And the good news is that, in the story of Mary and Joseph, we hear that God chooses those who are humble, and God chooses you to be part of God's story. God chooses you and I, to be a part of this ongoing story of his love and goodness coming into the world. We see, in Mary and Joseph, a humble example of ways that we might serve others, not that's looking for recognition, not in order that we might be praised by others, but so that we might live faithfully, as part of God's story. So that, when God comes to you and says, "Will you do this? Will you follow Me in this way," that we might say, "Yes, just like Mary and Joseph. God, use me, help me to be a part of Your work."

I'll confess that sometimes, I want recognition. I'd like people to say, "Hey, you're doing a great job. I appreciate what you're doing." But Jesus, much years later, would remind us, of course, that what God calls us to do is that when we do our works of righteousness, to do them where no one except your Father in Heaven can see them. Part of what we learn from Joseph is that to humbly serve God, is an invitation that God makes for each one of us.

So this Advent, I invite you to learn from Mary and Joseph. Join them in being humble and living as part of God's plan for the world. Will you pray with me?

O God, we give You thanks for Mary and Joseph, for their humility, for their faithfulness, for their willingness to be part of Your story. We ask, O God, that You might use us this season, that we might follow after You, and that You might be able to work through us, in our community and beyond. We offer ourselves to You, in Jesus' name. Amen.