



Christmas Eve
December 24, 2016
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Send Us Your Light: The Quiet

Matthew 1:18-25

Welcome to Christmas Eve at Chapel Hill. Whether this is your first time or you never miss a Sunday, we are so glad you are here. The angels brought good news to the shepherds that cold night. God had come to visit them! I've got some more good news! God has come to visit us, too! God is here. I hope you will look for him and welcome him!

We've been talking a lot about prayer this year. If God is real and if he cares about us and wants to be involved in our lives, then praying is like breathing! It is the essential way we connect with God. Most people assume that prayer means talking to God. And of course, it does mean that. When you come back tomorrow morning at 10:00 (in your pjs!), you will hear about Mary's famous Christmas prayer.

But there is someone else in the Christmas story whose prayers are not recorded. In fact, we have no record of him ever saying a single word. Not one word! Who was this quiet man? Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Joseph doesn't speak; Joseph never prays out loud. But Joseph listens, and it changes his life!

So, will you listen to the story of the Christmas character who never spoke a word:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

When you think about Christmas, it is easy to treat Joseph as a supporting actor. Mary and Jesus are the obvious stars of the show. But the shepherds and wise men and angels and Herod, they're the supporting cast. Joseph, too. In fact, it is tempting to think of him as superfluous... kind of an afterthought. He never speaks a word. He's not even the real father! The Holy Spirit took care of that! Mary is the only woman to ever live who could truly say, "I don't need a man to have a baby," and she'd be right!

Like I said, Joseph could seem superfluous; a bit-player in the story, tagging along with Mary, holding the donkey's reins, organizing visiting hours, making travel plans to Egypt. Just along for the ride.

You know, this marks my thirtieth Christmas Eve at Chapel Hill and over those years, I've looked into the faces of thousands of men who feel this way. Like they are just along for the ride. They are here for their families, but when it comes to spiritual things they are the silent partners. It is the wife who is spiritual. She urges the family to go to church, she is the one who prays. And dad, like so many men, feels superfluous... willing to be here, but feeling awkward and even a little useless because he doesn't relate to God in the same way as his wife. You know I'm right!

The story of Joseph can be a great encouragement to those of us, particularly men, who wonder if there is a spiritual role to be played by the quiet person; the one who tends to listen more than talk. And the answer is, "Absolutely!" So, let's look more closely.

We need to understand the context. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal was like an engagement on steroids. Betrothal started with a religious ceremony, complete with witnesses. After that, they were considered husband and wife. For a year, the husband prepared a home for his bride, and it was only then that she would come to live with him. But other than the sleeping arrangements, they were married! In fact, the only way to break betrothal was a divorce. And a betrothed woman who had an affair was considered an adulteress, an offense punishable by stoning!

Do you see Joseph's dilemma? Mary, a girl probably chosen for him by his parents when they were both children—this young woman who had pledged herself to him as his wife, was now pregnant. And if Joseph knew anything, he knew this: he wasn't the father. He would have remembered that!

Can you sense his turmoil? Joseph had every right to be outraged and hurt—every right to divorce her, to put this shame behind him. And if it meant that Mary suffered the ultimate punishment, well she brought that upon herself, right!?

But in a few words we glimpse the measure of this man: *"...her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly..."* As hurt as he was, Joseph loved Mary; he didn't want her harmed. He

would divorce her quietly. He would rise above his humiliation and act in Mary's best interest, even though she had betrayed him. What nobility!

Joseph was still stewing over this when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream with a remarkable piece of news. Mary was telling the truth; she had not been unfaithful. She was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and this child to be born would be the long-awaited Messiah... the savior of the world.

Notice this message came to Joseph in a dream. It wasn't the face to face conversation that Mary had with Gabriel. It was quieter; an inner prompting that came to him in his sleep. And notice how he responds.

First, he obeyed the Lord. *"When Joseph woke from sleep, he DID as the angel of the Lord had commanded him..."* In this simple statement, Joseph moves from being superfluous to being central to the story. Before this moment, Joseph was doing what most men do—trying to fix the problem, trying to figure things out. The text says, *"...but as he considered these things..."* Isn't that a typical man? Considering, planning, sorting through options, coming up with solutions. The voice of his culture whispered that Mary had betrayed him and deserved to be executed. His inner, merciful voice whispered that he ought to divorce her quietly and just move on!

But then he listened to another voice—not the voice of culture, not his inner voice—the voice of God prompting him to do something his community would never approve of. And his own common sense told him was crazy. God's promptings were counter-cultural and counter-intuitive, but Joseph listened, and then he obeyed.

I believe there are hundreds here tonight who have a sense that you ought to be doing something different with your life. You know, it might be God who is whispering to you with encouragements like these: "Let's break that habit; let's spend more time with your kids; let's show your wife how much you love her; let's tell your husband how much you respect him; let's forgive your dad; let's get those kids into Sunday School." The person who hears and obeys the promptings of God—who doesn't just dream about how things might be different—but acts upon what God has told them... that is the person God can use in quiet but powerful ways.

In Joseph's case, two things happened. First, we read, that he took his wife. Until that moment, every instinct told him to do this with Mary—push her away. But as he listened to God's promptings, he did this instead—draped arm around her. He took her to himself. He determined to love her, to protect her, to walk with her through whatever lay ahead. And notice, this meant that he was also taking upon himself her shame, her humiliation. In that moment of decision, Joseph said to Mary, "I will love you, I will protect you, I will take upon myself the scorn that might be directed toward you. Whatever life may bring, I will be your faithful companion." "He took his wife."

And Joseph did something else; he named his son. “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” It was Mary who gave birth to the baby. It was Joseph who named him. Names are a big deal in the Bible! They didn’t just give names that sounded good or started with the same letter. Names meant something! In this case, Joseph would give the name “Jesus” which meant “Yahweh saves” because this child would save his people from their sins. What a privilege! In naming him, Joseph pronounced a destiny over this child. Every child benefits from having a father or father-figure who speaks destiny and blessing into his life—a dad who tells his daughter the great things God is going to do through her... who tells his son how the world will be better because of him!

But there was more to it. In naming Jesus, Joseph was taking him as his own! He offered Jesus legitimacy. Whom the world called “bastard,” he called “son.” He claimed that boy as his own; he offered protection and covering and blessing. Joseph did for Jesus what he had done for Mary. He took their shame upon himself. Whatever humiliating thing society would say about this woman or this child, when he took them—when he gave them his name—he took all that upon himself. He put his own reputation at risk. He received the shame, so that his wife and boy might be spared.

I’ve read this story hundreds of times. But the irony hit me this week as never before: 33 years after this, the boy whom Joseph had taken as his own, whose shame Joseph received when he adopted him into his family—that boy became a man who gave his life on a cross. He took upon himself the shame of Joseph’s sin and Mary’s sin and the sin of the whole world. That boy, Joseph’s adopted son, would take upon himself our shame so that we might be adopted into his family.

And Joseph got to be a part of that story. He wasn’t superfluous at all. God invited him to play a part in the greatest love story ever told—the love of God for his broken world. And it started because Joseph listened to the quiet promptings of God.

So are you listening to God? How is he prompting you? What is God inviting you to do to be part of his story? Maybe you feel superfluous. Maybe you feel spiritually unimportant. You might be surprised what happens when you begin to listen to the quiet voice of God.

I have a new friend. He is a Jewish man named Adam who began attending Chapel Hill because he married a Christian woman and they decided to raise their daughter in the church. The other day over coffee, he told me a story. He was out with his two-year-old and she saw a Nativity Scene, pointed at the baby and said, “Jesus!” Adam found himself stirred by this. Here is this Jewish man, trained in Hebrew school in Brooklyn, with a two-year-old daughter who seems to love Jesus. He didn’t know what to do with this.

I told him, "You know, we Gentiles didn't come up with the idea of a Jewish Messiah. That was your idea! We just believed you! Now it's your turn to decide: 'Is Jesus my Messiah or not? And if he is, will I follow him?'" The only way to figure this out is to read his story." So, Adam got a Bible and is now reading through the gospels... the story of Jesus. He started in Matthew 1 and when he got to this story about Joseph, he emailed me this question: "I wonder if Joseph was Jesus' first disciple? Wasn't he the first to believe him and follow?"

What a great question! And of course, my question and prayer is, will Adam become the next disciple of Jesus? I don't know. But if he does, it will be in part because he paid attention to the quiet voice of God. In this case, to the voice of a two-year-old daughter who pointed to a manger and said, "Jesus!"

Many of you here tonight so that your children and grandchildren can point with wonder and say, "Jesus!" You assume this is mostly for them, but what if God has a message for you, not just your kids? In what quiet way might God be speaking to you? Didn't he prompt you to come tonight? Maybe he is prompting you to come back tomorrow or next week. Maybe he is prompting you to speak destiny into the lives of your family or to have mercy upon someone struggling with shame. Or maybe you are the person... the one who feels shame and needs to believe and receive the forgiveness of Jesus.

Whether you expected it or not, God is whispering to you tonight! Joseph, quiet Joseph, woke up and did what the Lord commanded. I pray you will have the courage to do the same.