

Ordinary Man; Special Father
Matthew 1:18-24

Joseph fades quickly and quietly from history. Except for young children wearing bathrobes at Christmas pageants, we would hardly give him a second thought. At that, to play Joseph is a mixed blessing at best.

Shepherds get to come in with neat staffs and canes, wise men wear crowns brightly spray-painted with gold glitter, angels wear magnificent aluminum foil wings, and the spotlight shines on Mary . . . but Joseph?

If you play Joseph you have to walk in with a girl, and if the director is really mean you have to even hold her hand, and then what is your part? To be told that you are incompetent: no room at the inn. You hadn't made reservations in time. Or maybe you couldn't pay for it.

But in any case, here you are in your bathrobe, having to hold this girl's hand, and then here come the angels and the shepherds and the wise men and the focus in on a baby and the focus is on Mary, and you, like the real Joseph, just sort of fade quietly from the scene.

Mary we know about. We follow her story. Her faith and frailty, fright and excitement, that she should be the mother of the son of God. Her pondering these things, her being with Jesus at a wedding, her being at the cross. Her son's telling a disciple, "Take care of my mother."

But Joseph? Who knows? A carpenter by trade, but what does that mean? Master woodworker? Probably not. The Greek description of him is "technon," means something less exalted. A contractor perhaps? More likely, an impoverished day laborer, couldn't even afford to give the proper offering in honor of Jesus' birth.

Luke mentions that Mary and Joseph offered two doves in sacrifice in accordance with the Law, but delicately fails to mention that such an offering was to be given only by people who could not afford the preferred offering of a lamb and a dove.

And after Jesus is grown, we never hear of Joseph again. He fades quietly away from salvation history, dies in obscurity, recalled only in bathrobe-bedecked Christmas pageants.

But this year, this morning, we are going to recall him once more, because today is Father's Day. You see, if God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, and he certainly did; God chose Joseph as well.

What does it mean to be a father? Someone said it is simple: Fathers, if you have a daughter, would you like her to grow up and marry someone just like you? A good question. If you have a son, if his thoughts, his attitudes, his actions, when he was grown, were just like yours, would your son be a blessing to his wife, his family, his community?

In an ideal world, every kid would grow up in a home with a mom and a dad, who are both

happily married for the first time to each other. Of course, ours is a world less than ideal. And some kids grow up in one-parent households and others belong to blended families, and while every situation has its own unique challenges, we believe that God is present in every situation, and God loves single parents and blended families and twice-married folk every bit as much as he loves picture postcard families.

And God bless those non-custodial parents, who make the often difficult effort to stay active in their kid's lives. It is worth the effort; it might take years before you realize it, but God will bless you for staying involved.

Because, all things being equal, it is good for kids to have both parents involved in their lives. Moms and dads do things differently. Of course, one dad I know said, my wife makes all the minor decisions involving the kids and I make all the major ones. What's a major decision? I don't know, we haven't had one yet.

And I know that in my family, I had a special role. I am the one who took Eric to Gettysburg and I am the one with whom he keeps up-to-date on Duke Basketball recruiting, the trials and travails of the Cleveland Indians. Important role. Essential. Mom is left out. You can tell when her eyes start to roll at the fortieth mention of still another 6-6 wing forward from Elk Mountain, Montana or who is playing well in the Indian's minor league system.

But when Eric is sick, he wanted Mom. After his wisdom teeth were out, he wanted a milk shake. I was home, I could make him one. No, "Could you see if Mom could come over from the office and make me one?" Because sometimes you need Dad and sometimes you need Mom.

I recall a couple having problems with parenting. Focused on three-year old child at the lake. Dad wanted her to jump off the dock. He would be right there in the water. Mom was worried it was too dangerous. In this case, Dad's job was to encourage her, to give her the confidence to dare, to risk. Mom's job was to preserve and protect. Both roles important. We agreed, Dad could allow her to jump, and Mom would insist the daughter wear a life jacket.

And however imperfectly we manage to be Mom and Dad, ours is an important and God-given calling. Because, for all the influences in our kid's lives, from school to internet to TV to the culture at large, we parents are the most profound influence. We are the ones who do the shaping. Dads, would you want your daughter to marry a man just like you? Would you want your son to be just like you?

And let us not be afraid to use our influence. Some parents are afraid to set limits, afraid to discipline, because, well, they want their kids to think they are cool. Parents: here's a news flash. Your kids don't think you are cool. And when they are growing up, they don't want you to be their best friend. They have plenty of friends. They want a mom and a dad. To show them how to live. And they want you there for them to complain about for being too demanding, too strict.

But I started all this talking about Joseph, who faded quietly away from history. As a carpenter, he left no legacy that we know of, no fine furniture, no palace. But as a man of faith and as a

father, maybe he has left his mark.

He was a man of mercy. Even when confronted with a situation in which Mary seemed to have been unfaithful to him, he acted out of mercy toward Mary. He resolved to put her away quietly. To spare her more shame and humiliation. He rose above his own sense of anger, betrayal, and disappointment.

Dads, are we teaching our kids to be men and women of mercy? There was once a woman caught in adultery and they wanted to stone her to death, a fate that could have befallen Mary had Joseph been different. Instead, Joseph's son said, "Is there no one left to condemn you? Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." The son, like Joseph, was a man of mercy.

Joseph honored Jesus' mom. Loved her. Thought the best of her. Was willing to believe the best about her, that this child was a miracle from God. A good father honors his wife and teaches his kids how parents should be treated. And Joseph's son grew up and treated women as equals. Went to their homes and taught them. Allowed them to tell others about him.

Joseph's son had a heart open to God. Was willing to listen to the Godly voice whispering in his ear. Many fathers leave religion to the moms; blessed is the father who lives in faith, practices his faith. Fathers teach kids how to golf, how to fish, how to drive.

Fathers, are we teaching them how to live lives that bring honor to God? The whisper Joseph heard was to take Mary as his wife and raise Jesus as his son. And there came a time when the son had to decide, "Dare I continue to listen to God in my life, even now?"

And his answer, "Father if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me, yet not as I will, but thine be done." And Joseph's son remained open and faithful to God, even when faithfulness meant the cross.

Fathers, you are incredibly important. Not just as breadwinners, not just as career folk, not just as husbands, but as fathers, as fathers. You have influence that you might not even be aware of. Fatherhood is a God-given responsibility and there is no blueprint, no handbook.

But there are examples, thousands of examples. And today, we think of Joseph. A man of mercy. A man who honored his wife. A man who had a heart open to God. And raised a son who lived by those same values.

Joseph fades quietly from history. But what a legacy. And when his son was a grown man, he wanted to teach us about God's nature. Now, today, we shy away sometimes from calling God, "father" because for many it brings up sad associations of abuse or detachment or indifference. And shame on any man who lives in such a way that he brings dishonor to the word, "Father."

But Jesus. When Jesus wanted to tell us what God is like, he suggested, why not call God father. Because when Jesus thought of God's nature, he thought of his father. And when he thought of his father, that reminded him of the merciful, compassionate, loving, life-giving God for whom he gave his life.

Let me say it again: when Jesus thought of God, he was reminded of his father. And when Jesus thought of his father, Jesus was reminded of God. Not such a bad legacy to leave, for Joseph, or for you, or for me. Amen.