

“Joseph the Carpenter”, Matthew 1:12-16

December 27, 2009, Paul Rader for
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On the first Sunday of Advent, William began a series of sermons on “kinfolk” found in the infancy narratives of the Gospels. That Sunday we looked at Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Following that was a sermon on Elizabeth, Mary’s older cousin and the mother of John the Baptist. On the 20th the sermon was on Mary. Today, we will consider Joseph. Joseph the carpenter.

Doug Hare (1993) says that the most obvious feature of the first two chapters of Matthew is that “Joseph, not Mary, is the primary human actor” (*Interpretation: Matthew*, p. 8) which is in contrast with Luke 1 and 2 where “Mary is dominant and Joseph is but a shadow in the background.” Three times in Matthew Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream; three times he must do something; three times he does it!

First, an angel told Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit...” We are told that when he woke up, “he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” Second, an angel told Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay here until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” “So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.” Third, an angel told Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” “So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.”

Joseph may be the primary human actor in Matthew’s infancy narrative, but as soon as the family is established once again in Israel, he drops from the story. Virtuous though he was, righteous and merciful though he was, obedient though he was, the Gospel apparently has no further use for him. Church tradition, however, was not content to let him go. Extra-biblical accounts of his life were popular in the early church. It is as though his life was a vacuum into which all kinds of speculation rushed in to fill.

For instance, a document known as *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* explains that Joseph had four sons (Judas, Justus, James, and Simon) and two daughters (Assia and Lydia) by a previous marriage. He wed twelve year old Mary when he was ninety. However, he was blessed with mental and physical youth and finally died at the age of one hundred and eleven.

There is also a text referred to as *The Gospel of James*. In this one, Joseph and Mary are on their way to Bethlehem, but three miles outside of town Mary cries, “That which is within me is ready to be born!” Joseph finds a cave and places her in it. He then finds a Hebrew midwife to attend her. Darkness surrounds the cave, but when the child is born a great light fills it with glory.

There are stories of Jesus working side by side with Joseph in his carpenter shop in Nazareth. And some traditions say that when Joseph died, he did so, “in Mary’s arms.”

A few years ago, a British newspaper ran a story reported by the staff members of Dorset County Hospital. It concerned a little boy's account of his recent tonsillectomy at the hospital. He said, "When I went into the big room it was very bright and there were two lady angels dressed in white. Then two men angels looked down my throat and one said, 'God! Look at that child's tonsils.' Then God looked and said, 'I'll take them out at once'."

The boy obviously mistook a doctor for an angel. And yet, it seemed perfectly natural to him that angels should be in the operating room watching out for him. Three times in Matthew an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. And, yes, each time the angel’s message moves the narrative along, propels the action, and extends the plot. These angelic visits make for compelling literature, but we don’t treasure the Gospel just because it’s a good read. What are we to make of repeated visitations by angels in this story? It was Albert Einstein who said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.” That’s what we have here.

The angels in Joseph’s dreams do at least three things: they give guidance, they speak to Joseph’s fears, and they share good news.

The angels gave guidance. Joseph was in a difficult position. How could this have happened, that his betrothed should become pregnant before their marriage had properly taken place? The stakes involved were considerably more than social embarrassment or the loss of face. By the law codes of that time, it was possible that Mary could have been condemned as an adulteress, taken out to a public place, and stoned to death by a mob. In fact, Joseph may well have been under some pressure, as a responsible adult male, to uphold the laws and traditions, to make an example of Mary. But clearly, Joseph cared about Mary enough that he couldn’t bear to see her life end in such a way.

But, what would people think? If he ignored this shame on his honor, how could he hold his head up in town? He did have another option: he could “dismiss her quietly.” While this was not a death sentence it meant a life of destitution for Mary. She would be “damaged goods” in a society where there was no safety net for such women. She would be – terrifyingly – on her own. The very best she could hope for would be a life of servitude in someone else’s home.

The angels also spoke to Joseph’s fears. Fear of what? Fear of the angel? No. Fear of taking Mary as his wife? Yes! *Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.* Having Mary executed was a problem; putting her away privately was a problem, but also by continuing to live with her Joseph exposed *himself* to liability. To execute her, to put her away, saves *himself*. Now, if he follows the angel's advice, he opens himself to stigma and possibly to severe punishment. He could be fined *and* she could still be killed.

Bill Long says that **in this case, the intervention of the angel was an intervention that led Joseph into more danger.** Yes, he went ahead with the marriage, took her into his home—and ultimately had to flee his home for the life of a refugee in Egypt; had to flee for his life! What would it be like in Egypt? Could they get along in the land where their ancestors had been slaves? There was much to fear.

The angels gave guidance, the angels spoke to Joseph's fears, and thirdly, they shared good news. ...*they will call him Immanuel—which means, 'God with us.'*”

God with us! God is with us! God is with you! We are not alone, cannot ever be alone, life is not faced alone, grief and loss and sorrow and depression and turmoil and anxiety are not endured in isolation—God is with us!!!

Generally speaking, we Americans are mistrusting of "angel" stories. We look askance at those who tell angel stories, even though they are powerful symbols of the presence of God. John Jewell, who teaches at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa tells of a woman named Patti, a member of his parish. These are her words:

On that morning, I knew my brother's time was very short. After sitting with him for hours of very difficult breathing, I decided to call a chaplain, if not for Steve, then for myself. He had been incoherent all morning. I knew this was the end. His breaths were getting farther apart.

The chaplain arrived within an hour. She was a great comfort. Her own brother was dying of cancer. She understood my pain. I told her about Steve's' religious background, including his interest in the Bible the last few days.

We went to Steve's room encircled his bed and said a prayer. I asked the chaplain to pray for God to help him, and get rid of anything holding him here. She did this. She asked Angels to come and protect him, and to show him his way to Heaven. I asked her to read from the Bible about Heaven and its beauty so Steve would not be afraid. I whispered in his ear to go with the Angels.

As we sat with him, I looked out the window and saw five white birds flying above us, always staying together in formation, two small and three large. They were beautiful. They looked like egrets, which are water birds. This was odd, since we were in the middle of a huge city with no water around.

Eventually, we realized the birds had not there before the chaplain had arrived. They did not leave.... until Steve passed away. It was then that we realized they were gone. We never saw them again.

When I returned home ... in my bedroom ... I looked up at a picture my brother had recently bought and had framed for me. There in the picture were five white birds.

