

The Strong Silent Type

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Matthew 1:18-25

This week a mysterious object appeared in my office. My son Ezra was playing with this little piece of carved wood. I assumed he had carried it back from Cindy's office at some point, but she didn't recognize it. It's a small, simple Joseph — the kind that sits towards the back and out of the way in manger scenes — usually looking over Mary's shoulder or tucked behind a donkey, feeling as useless as fathers often do in such situations.

I later pieced together that Ezra had snagged Joseph from his baby sitter's nativity scene and stashed it in his diaper bag, later pulling it out to play with in my office — thus providing me with a nice, mysterious object on which to meditate for this sermon.

This passage from Matthew provides us with about as full a picture of Joseph as we get in the Bible. Beyond these few lines we later see him orchestrate his family's escape into and return from Egypt. He is along for the trip when Jesus visits the temple at age 12. He was a carpenter or tradesman, and probably taught Jesus the craft. We don't know when or how he died. And in the recorded stories about him, Joseph doesn't say a single word. In nativity pageants even the shepherds get more lines than him.

This marginal man — a back-water carpenter — was for Jesus, a formative image of God. God was not frequently referred to as "Father" in the first testament, but Jesus frequently used that title, especially in the book of John.

How did this silent man with calloused hands become for Jesus an image of the Divine?

I've been steeped enough in progressive Mennonitism to get nervous talking so much about Fathers. Feminist theology has persuaded me that we are in a much needed corrective period in our use of language. "Father" language — which represents only one portion of the Biblical nomenclature for God — needs to be balanced by feminine images. In my experience, if people have negative reactions to memories of a parent, the father is more often the culprit — sometimes absentee, often emotionally distant and occasionally an abuser. For many, the father represents stern discipline while the mother represents unconditional love. Perhaps this is all the more reason to explore together what it means to be a father.

I believe that all parents, as flawed as we are, are stuck with providing children with their first image of God. And all of us, whether parents or not, can examine our understanding of God through the lens of our parents. I would be curious to know how many people who view God as distant and uncaring had distant and uncaring parents. Or how many who focus on God as all-powerful had fathers they saw as superman.

One thing we know of Joseph is that he dreamed of his son. My son, Ezra, is named for my father; that should tell you something of my experience of parenthood, both as a son and a father. Seeing Ezra (the little one) grow and change certainly makes me dream and wonder about his future. What does his appearance and temperament as a toddler tell us about who he will be as a

teenager or a young man? What will he do? Who will he love? Will he care about the things I care about? What of who I am will he embrace, and what will he reject?

We know so little of Joseph. In the Biblical record, he never speaks — he only acts. Our only insight into his thoughts comes from his dreams. In this dream, anticipating the arrival of Jesus, we see that he must have been afraid, because the angel begins by calming his fears. The dreams also reveal his faithfulness — he listened, learned and obeyed. Frankly I'm a bit more attracted to Mary's responses when she encountered angels — she had the nerve to ask some questions. Both of them, though, accepted an immense responsibility — to prepare Jesus for the world. I love the image of Mary bearing Peace on Earth. But we should also acknowledge that Joseph helped to cultivate that Peace.

In this final week of advent, take some time to imagine with the man behind the manger. He cannot have known all that was to come, but with all that he had and all that he was, he followed the dreams of angels.