

Series: Characters of Christmas
Title: Joseph, the Righteous Carpenter
Text: Matthew 1:18-25
Proposition: Everyone can be righteous in spite of believing doubts and doubting beliefs by “faithing” it like Joseph.

Note: This sermon is adapted from Haddon Robinson’s sermon, “The Neglected Joseph Davidson.”

Hi. My name is Joe the Carpenter. You may already know me. I've been around Christmas for a long time. But you may not know me very well. I'm glad that you enjoy celebrating Christmas. Here's my story.

I am descendant of David, Israel's greatest king. That's not a big deal since David lived a thousand years before I was born. David's reign had lost its glory. Many were living in moral and spiritual darkness. Since we found it hard to make a living in Bethlehem, we moved and settled in Nazareth, near Lake Galilee. Many wondered if any good thing could come out of Nazareth. I simply wondered if anything could have come out of Nazareth. However, it was good for my trade.

I'm a carpenter. You know how practical we can be. We're not poets or philosophers. I like to work with wood. I like solid wood, because it has integrity. I like that in wood and in people.

I loved Nazareth, because I met Mary there. Before long, we began our year-long engagement allowing our families to become acquainted and work out the dowry. During this time, I came to love Mary more. I loved the way she laughed; her eyes would dance with joy. As a woman, she was as solid as the temple pillars. She was thoughtful, pondering life. She could express herself in magnificent songs. Our

engagement was glorious as I dreamed of building a house for Mary and for our children. It's strange though, how quickly, dreams can turn to nightmares.

Mary had become quiet and withdrawn. I asked her what was wrong; she told me she just couldn't talk about it. I wondered about her silence. I wondered if I had done something to offend her, or if her family hated me or if they had found something to forbid our marriage.

Finally, I had to say something. Little did I realize how unprepared I was for her answer. She looked at me, weeping and said, "I'm pregnant." I was stunned. Pregnant! I had not been with her. If not me, who? How could this happen? How can no one know anything about it? We had love and trust, plans and dreams. Why? I had questions, but I was afraid of the answers. When she did answer me, it was like a slap in the face.

She said an angel had appeared to her and told her that she was going to be the mother of Israel's Savior. She kept her virginity while the Spirit of God came upon her and created a baby. I was furious. It was one thing for her to betray our love, and it was another thing to treat me like some stupid fool by telling me a crazy story. I could not believe it. You would not believe it. I wanted to get even for what she had done to our love, to my faith, and my reputation.

I am a righteous man, trying to live according to the Scriptures. I have a reputation to protect. As soon as they knew that Mary was pregnant, they would assume I was the father, and my reputation would be destroyed. I was so mad that I was going

to take it to the elders, sever the relationship, and claim my innocence. However, I knew that I couldn't do that. I loved Mary. Even though my trust was shattered, I would not expose her to public shame. I decided to end our relationship quietly.

Before the gossip became unbearable, Mary left Nazareth. She went to live with her cousin, Elizabeth, and Zechariah, her husband, who gave her a safe place to stay. After Mary left, I couldn't get her out of my mind. I'd work in my shop, but my mind was somewhere else. I could not eat or sleep. One night I had a dream, where I was walking through a dark place, and suddenly up ahead there was a blinding light. In the center of that light, I saw an angel. I was terrified, and the angel told me not to be afraid. You already heard Matthew's accurate version of the angel's message.

When I awoke, I was elated. God spoke to me. Mary had told me the truth. I immediately went to Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary, apologizing for my doubt. Mary and I went back to Nazareth and married. In all that time, I never touched my wife.

Our lives were forever changed. I knew that God was with us. He would care for us, even through the difficulties. Remember I am a carpenter and not a theologian. I could not imagine how wrong I was.

During Mary's ninth month, Augustus called for a census to collect taxes requiring all males to return to their birthplace. Therefore, I planned to go to Bethlehem.

We decided that it would be best for Mary to come with me in order to avoid gossip. We traveled hard for three days. I trusted that good folks and relatives in Bethlehem would give us what we needed.

I underestimated the census crowd. We got to Bethlehem, and found my relatives' house full. Mary's pains began. I searched desperately for lodging. The place where poor people stayed was packed. Finally, I found a stable where a farmer kept his oxen. Mary lay on the straw because there was no bed.

When the baby came, I didn't know what to do; I'm a carpenter. Mary delivered the baby alone. I severed the cord, then cleaned the child as best I could and wrapped him in cloths. I put him in a manger, because of the filth on the floor.

I had all kinds of questions. If Mary was highly favored of God, and if God had everything to do with this, how do you explain the dirty stable, the cattle, and the loneliness? No one came from Jerusalem or Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of our son. We were alone.

OK, there were shepherds, some country smelly rednecks. They said they had heard an angel choir in their pastures. They came to look at our baby boy. But we felt the loneliness.

After the census had subsided, I decided we would stay in Bethlehem. I wasn't about to go back to Nazareth with all that gossip. We rented a house, and found some work. After we were there a year or more, we had some Iranian astrologers visit us.

They said they had seen a star following it to Jerusalem. They visited Herod and asked him about a pretender to his throne. Then they arrived in Bethlehem.

Here was our boy, Jesus, just a toddler. These pagan dignitaries came in, and when they saw him, they fell down on their knees and worshiped this toddler. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they left.

We needed those gifts. In a short time, a dream warned me that I was to take Mary and the Jesus into Egypt. Thank the Lord for the gold and expensive perfume. It helped support us while we lived in Egypt. We were unwelcome strangers.

We lived in Egypt almost two years. After Herod died, God directed us back to Nazareth. Here he is, the Creator of the universe, and he sends us back to Nazareth with its dirty gossip. I had all kinds of questions. I used to think that if I were to see a real angel like our ancestors had seen, I would never doubt. I would always believe.

However, I had my doubts. Honestly, Jesus did not seem much like a savior of the world. Oh, he was good and obedient. But he was fed from Mary's breast. He cried. He came to the table along with the other children. He didn't perform any miracles. When he fell in the streets of Nazareth and skinned his knee, it bled. He wasn't that different.

When he was twelve, we went down to Jerusalem for worship. On the way back, we lost him. We thought he was with relatives. However, they hadn't seen him. I had lost the Son of God. I didn't know what to do, so we retraced our steps. We went back to Jerusalem and found him talking to our leaders, asking them questions. Mary said,

"Young man, why have you done this to us? We have been worried out of our minds looking for you?" He said, *"Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?"*

That sounds good in church, but when you hear that from a 12-year-old, you don't quite know what to do. My point is, he wasn't that much different. Oh, I wondered.

I couldn't share my doubts with Mary. I couldn't talk to neighbors. They had much more earthy explanations for Jesus' birth. In fact, he never lived it down. There were times when they would throw it in his face. "We weren't born of fornication," they would say. "You have two fathers. We have one. You have a real father and then you have Joseph." They never let him or me forget it. I certainly wasn't going to bring it up to them. I just stuffed all my fears and doubts.

One thing I did have was God's promise. Eight hundred years before, Isaiah said that a virgin would conceive and have a son and would call his name Emmanuel, which meant *God with us*. It was just a sentence, but I held onto this promise for dear faith. It's all I had.

Some of you here have a faith like Mary's. It's obedient and strong, rich and devout. You're God's special people. Some of you, I think, are more like me—practical people. You live in a world of cause and effect. You like things that you can touch, feel, and measure. You find it hard to believe.

Faith has its moods. After I was confronted by the angel, there were times I thought I would never doubt again. But there were times when the whole thing didn't

make sense. You may have periods like that. You believe your doubts; you doubt your beliefs. Sometimes you wonder if you really believe at all. I understand.

All I can say is, when I faced those questions, I just came down on the side of faith. I felt I had to trust when I didn't feel like trusting. God used this simple faith. I, Joe the Carpenter, put my thumbprint on Jesus Christ. I taught him to be a carpenter. In fact, the folks in the village referred to him as "the carpenter."

Of course, he was the Savior of the world. He put his thumbprint upon my soul, but it wasn't easy. I learned that there is nothing like trusting and obeying.

That's my story. I'm glad that you want to celebrate Christmas and worship Jesus. Remember though, that I, Joe the carpenter, had something to do with that. When God sent his boy to Earth, he put him into the care of this carpenter, who sometimes believed his doubts and doubted his beliefs but faithed it through. I'm not the main character of the story. When you celebrate, you might remember that when God wanted someone to take care of his boy, he chose Joe Davidson, a carpenter who believed the best he could. Perhaps, that is why some call me righteous. (1904)