

Advent 4, Year A  
Matthew 1: 18-25  
December 23, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

Joseph's Yes to God:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Were you ever in a Christmas pageant? Do you remember the part you played?  
The part you wanted to play?

I remember my first Christmas Pageant at St. Paul's Episcopal School. That pageant is a really big deal. Folks get there early to get a good seat. I got there early too. I wanted to check out the scene. The older kids and the younger alums were congregating on the steps outside the church, hanging around and being cool as teenagers are wont to do.

Seeing those kids clustered on the steps, I got curious. I wanted to know the buzz, so I moved slowly from cluster to cluster eavesdropping all the way. You know what they were talking about? Not who was dating whom. Not even what they were wearing. They were talking about the part they played in the Christmas Pageant when they were in second grade. "I was King Herod." "So was I." "I was a lamb." "Weren't those costumes cool!" "I was an angel." "I was Mary." "I was a shepherd. I loved that shepherd dance."

That night on the steps, I didn't hear anyone swell with pride and announce a bit too loudly, "I was Joseph." No one seemed to remember clamoring over getting to play Joseph. Joseph was overlooked, pushed aside. Isn't that often the way with Joseph? We see him as wooden figure. A place-holder if you will.

But there's so much more to Joseph.

Joseph. A decent man. A righteous man. A good man facing an impossible choice. A man wanting to do the right thing – by Mary and by God. A man caught on the horns of a dilemma – torn between his love for Mary and his life-long habit of living by the law of God.

When he hears that Mary is pregnant, Joseph does the best he can. He resolves to let her go quietly thus sparing her death by stoning. And then....

In the midst of a restless sleep, an angel of God comes to Joseph and asks him to take Mary as his wife and to name her child thus claiming that child as his own.

We know the story. Joseph says “yes” – yes to God. That’s often where the story ends.

But there’s so much more to Joseph’s yes to God. In naming Jesus, Joseph claims him as his own and raises Jesus as his own son.

Watching over him. Listening in the night. Worrying about him. Doing all he can to keep that baby safe. Loving him. Teaching him his trade.

Think of it. Think of the role Joseph played in Jesus’ life. Imagine what Jesus learned from Joseph.

I like to imagine the two of them at the carpenter’s bench. Joseph teaching Jesus how to use the plane and adze. Joseph telling stories from the Bible, sharing the parables of old. Singing the psalms. Singing of a father’s love.

I like to imagine Jesus watching Joseph. Seeing how Joseph treats the people others ignore. Noting Joseph’s kindness. How Joseph goes out of his way to make others feel welcome. Seeing the tenderness Joseph shows to Mary.

I can imagine Joseph telling Jesus stories about the Romans. I can almost hear him muttering about the way the Romans treated the Israelites – the heavy taxes, the hillsides crowded with crosses, the arrogance of power. I can imagine Joseph instilling in Jesus a passion for justice. I can imagine him sharing with Jesus his longing for peace.

Think of it. Think of the role Joseph played in Jesus’ life. After all they were together almost thirty years.

And think of the role Jesus played in Joseph’s life. Think of how Joseph’s yes to God rearranged his life; think of the richness it brought him; think of how that yes to God stretched Joseph into new possibilities, new relationships, new ways of being in the world.

God comes to us as God’s angel came to Joseph, inviting us to take God’s child into our homes and into our hearts. Inviting us to claim that child as our own and to live as Joseph did into the fullness of God’s dream for us. God gives each of us an opportunity to say “yes” – to say yes to God.

That’s what our baptismal covenant is all about – our yes to God. We promise to tell the stories of our faith, to join together around the table, to share the bread and wine. We promise to live our faith as Joseph did in word and deed – in the little things we do, in the way we lead our daily lives.

It's fitting don't you think that on this Sunday as we await the birth of Jesus, we welcome a little child into our midst. We name her, we take her in as one of us, and we promise to raise her as our own.

It's fitting, don't you think, that today we clamor to play Joseph's part and echo his yes to God.