

“If I Happened to Be Joseph...”
(Matthew 1: 18-25)

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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One of my treasured family heirlooms is a crèche that my parents acquired in Bethlehem on a trip to the Holy Land. Joseph of Nazareth, a shepherd boy, three kings, camels, sheep, and cattle constitute the small olive-wood figurines gathered with an adoring mother Mary around a manger cradling a baby, in a barn-like shelter that I made myself. Every Christmas, as part of the seasonal decorations in our home, I reconstruct this nativity scene on an end table in the living room.

Taking a close look at the face and figure of Joseph, one’s imagination detects in him a range of emotions: pride, responsibility, protectiveness, astonishment, confusion. This carpenter of Nazareth has tried to do the right thing for his young fiancé, who is pregnant without the benefit of marriage, sheltering her from the inevitable social stigma in a patriarchal society, by retreating with her to his home town, Bethlehem. But if she is pregnant, without the benefit of marriage—without relations between them—then how can this be?

What if I happened to be Joseph?

Many of you have met my son, Danny. Not surprisingly, at my age, I am often presumed to be Danny’s grandfather. I was forewarned of this oft-repeated misunderstanding almost immediately following Danny’s birth, by a surprising event that took place in the middle of the night at Holy Cross Hospital. Our baby had been transferred to the nursery, and I informed Chris that I wanted to pay him a visit. Making my way down the darkened hall, a security-conscious nurse asked: “May we help you sir?” I responded that I was just heading to the nursery to check on my son. She said, obviously without adequate thought: “You mean your grandson!” With impressive control, and not a little pride, I restated: “I’m going to see my son!”

Again, Joseph was a devout Jewish man, aware of the religious law handed down through the ages, and one who tried to follow that law to the letter. So when he learned that Mary was pregnant, before their actual marriage, he first resolved to leave her quietly, so that she would not be subject to public shame. But after visited in a dream by an angel, he was encouraged to remain with Mary, take her as his wife, and name the child “Jesus”, meaning “God Saves”.

(Let’s just pause, to acknowledge parenthetically, that this entire circumstance would likely be tabloid fodder in the #MeToo era. Nowadays, in an environment swiftly transforming, radio stations are even considering whether the lyrics in the song “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” are suggestive of an inappropriate, coercive sexual relationship.)

Scholarship reminds us that the biblical explanations of the birth of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, were constructed much later by authorities who were awed by the nature of the death of Jesus. Knowing what they did about the end of the Savior’s life compelled them to explain with imagination what must surely have been the unique circumstances of the beginning of the Savior’s life. They were undoubtedly influenced by the accepted view of their era that every great leader came from supernatural origins. That literary technique does not in my mind diminish the role of Joseph in the life of Jesus, or the role of Mary, for that matter. In my mind, in fact, it elevates the role of each.

What if I happened to be Joseph—the loyal, protective fiancé of an expecting young woman? I imagine that I’d be wrestling with the question that Mary herself is also likely considering:

How can this be?

Is his firstborn “the Son of David”, or “the Son of God”? Is he “the Son of Man”, or “the Son of the Holy Spirit”? Is this child placed in the womb of my betrothed by virtue of my direct link to David, who was of the House of Jacob (Israel), who was descended of Abraham, who

was descended of Adam? Or is this child placed in the womb of my betrothed by an act of God independent of my relations with her?

How can this be!?

Even Paul of Tarsus, the most prolific of the Apostles, is not fully prepared to resolve the issue in his communication with the fledgling Christian community in Rome (Romans 1:2-3): “This Gospel God announced ...about his Son: on the human level he was born of David’s stock, but on the level of the Holy Spirit he was declared Son of God”!

I imagine Joseph, the humble wood-worker, to have been emotionally overwhelmed upon witnessing the miracle of birth. As a father, I have experienced it. So I can picture Joseph’s need to step away from the birthing room—the barn behind the inn—to contemplate the astounding event with the aid of some fresh air. And upon reentering the hotel compound from a walk, I hear the innkeeper halting Joseph at the gate: “May I help you sir?” I imagine Joseph’s straightforward response: “I’m just returning to my wife... to see my son.” The innkeeper: “But sir...she cannot be your...you cannot be his...” Joseph, with impressive control, and not a little pride, restates: “I’m going to see my son!”

Son of David? Son of God? Son of Man? Son of the Holy Spirit? Joseph understands and accepts his role, either way: “I’m going to see my son!”

What if I happened to be Joseph?

What if, as observant Jews, following a pilgrimage with an entourage to the temple in Jerusalem, our traveling group was half way back to Nazareth before Mary and I realized that young Jesus was not with us? And what if, when we returned to find him, around him was a collection of the most learned scholars listening to his every word? What if, upon trying to break through the crowd, I was halted by one of the temple authorities who asked: “May I help you sir?” And I explained: “I’m going to see my son.” And the authority mocked me: “But you, sir, cannot be the young man’s....” “I’m going to see my son!” Only to hear from my boy: “Did you not know to find me in my Father’s house!?”

What if, some years after that, given that I was still living, which is highly doubtful, I learned that Jesus was in serious trouble this time, in Jerusalem again—in trouble for purposely creating the impression among friends and enemies alike that God was his Father!...that he was the Son of God. I might just drop everything, and rush through the unruly, seething crowd on the hill called Golgatha, pushing my way to where I could see him there like a criminal on the cross, and what if I then whispered one last time, to those nearby, with impressive control, and not a little pride:

“I’ve come...I’ve come...to see my son!”