Sunday, December 21, 1980
THE MOST FORGOTTEN PERSON AT CHRISTMAS
Isaiah 7:10-15; Matthew 1:18-25

During each Christmas season, there are always people who are forgotten. In nursing homes, in hospitals, in prisons and jails, there are people who have no relatives or friends and there is no one to remember them at Christmas or at any other time of the year.

A letter to "Dear Abby," from a cab driver this week told of forgotten people at Christmas. It said, "Dear Abby, I drove a taxi for a while and Christmas Eve was a heartbreaker. Nearly all my calls came from bars. Most of my passengers were elderly; all of them were lonely. As the evening progressed, some of my fares were so drunk I had to help them into and out of the cab. Abby, please remind your readers to remember elderly friends and relatives who are alone at Christmas time."

Even as we remember the first Christmas, there are people in the story who are mostly forgotten. Such is the case of Joseph, the Carpenter of Nazareth, the husband of Mary. Mary didn't forget him, and Jesus certainly didn't forget him as we'll see later, but we often do. And there are so many things we can learn from the life of Joseph.

The New Testament accounts of Jesus and the family from which he came make little mention of Joseph, so that what we know about him we have to get mostly from reading between the lines.

We know at least these things. Matthew's Gospel traces the family tree of Joseph forty-one generations back to King David, and then including Jesus, forty-two generations. In other words, the early church considered Jesus to be the son of Joseph and therefore a descendent of King David.

Also, according to other New Testament accounts, the contemporaries of Jesus also considered him to be the son of Joseph. In the Gospel of John, for example, Philip says to Nathanael: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also in the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." But Philip at the same time, finds it difficult to believe that the Messiah could come out of Nazareth.

Later when Jesus says to the Jews, "I am the bread which came down from heaven," they reply, "Is not this Jesus, the Son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" Then when Jesus returns to Nazareth, the people say of him, "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers, James and Joseph, Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?"

When Jesus is twelve years old and Joseph and Mary find him in the temple after a three day's search, his mother says to him, "Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." And when Luke's Gospel describes the presentation in the temple when Jesus was an infant, Luke says, "His father and mother marveled at what Simeon said about their son."

However, in the birth stories of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, not much is said about Joseph. He is the forgotten person. When Luke introduces us to Mary, he says that she was a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And Matthew's Gospel

tells us of the revelation which came to Joseph — the dream he had through which God spoke to him.

Later in Bethlehem, after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph has another dream which instructs him to take the child and his mother to Egypt in order to save the baby's life. After some months in Egypt, Joseph has another dream which informs him. that it is now safe to return to Israel. The family then settles in the town of Nazareth, where Joseph is a carpenter. Nothing more is heard about Joseph until the incident revolving around the Temple when Jesus was 12 years old. After that, Joseph disappears from the pages of the New Testament.

Because we hear nothing more about Joseph, tradition tells us that he died while Jesus was a teenager, and that Jesus being the oldest child in the family takes over as head of the household until the younger children are on their own.

These are the basic facts about the life of Joseph as we know them and there's much about his life that needs to be remembered because of what it teaches us about our faithfulness and God's faithfulness.

1. Note first that Matthew's Gospel describes Joseph as a "just" man. We are told that when he discovered that his bride-to-be was pregnant and he knew that he was not the father, he decided that he didn't want to embarrass Mary in any way or in any way put her to shame.

In other words, Joseph was a kind and fair individual. He did not take hasty action. He rather considered first what effect his actions would have on others. Thus, he didn't make wild accusations against Mary. He was instead patient and understanding. He didn't panic.

Because he was patient, his patience was rewarded in an unexpected way. He had a dream, and, in this dream, he was told that the child Mary was carrying was to be a very special human being. And he, as Mary's husband, was to have one of the most unique and important roles in history.

The message to us is clear. Don't panic in an unusual situation or in something you don't at first understand. Don't jump too quickly to unwarranted conclusions ·which lead to action you might later regret. Wait until you get all the facts, then make a decision.

2. Secondly, Joseph was a man of deep religious faith. Those of us who have little or no faith rarely have dreams or visions which guide us. It took a man of deep faith to pay attention to the dream which informed him that Mary had conceived a child of the Holy Spirit. It took a man of deep faith to marry a woman who was pregnant with a child that was not his.

Often Mary the mother of Jesus is portrayed as an outstanding example of a person of faith and obedience to God, and that she was. But equally so was Joseph. After his dream, he took Mary as his wife and remained obedient to the word of God. His faith remained strong as he continued to listen and pay attention to God's instructions by taking the child and his mother to Egypt and later bringing them back to Israel.

Because of his faithfulness, Joseph was able to be an important part of the greatest adventure in human history. Wonderful surprises come to those of us who are faithful.

3. A third fact to remember about Joseph is that he must've been a loving and understanding father to Jesus and to his other children. It is a tribute to Joseph that Jesus interpreted God in terms of "fatherhood." Jesus may indeed have been dealing in memories of the home in Nazareth when he spoke of children asking for bread and not receiving a stone from their father.

In many of the parables which Jesus told, the father is a significant figure. Remember the story of the prodigal son. It is the father who is forgiving and welcomes the son back. Jesus also talked about the heavenly father being able and willing to give good gifts to those who ask Him. No doubt Joseph knew the need of those who looked to him for food, for shelter and for clothing. He ministered to those needs as best he could. Thus, Jesus could easily move from that experience of an earthly father to the trust in the Father of all creation who knows our needs before we ask him.

Even though our human fatherhoods and motherhoods are at best a dim reflection of the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God, they are the basis upon which we begin to understand the love of God.

To us who are parents, we need to remember especially that when Jesus interpreted God in terms of fatherhood, he laid on all earthly parents the responsibility of being loving, understanding, forgiving, just and fair parents.

So it is that the life and faithfulness of Joseph the carpenter have much to say to us in our own religious journeys.

This story of Joseph also reveals to us something about the way in which God works in our lives and in the world.

We learn from the story of Joseph that God often works through ordinary, unlikely, yet faithful people like Joseph and like you and me. God often chooses people that we ourselves might not choose were we in charge.

Joseph was not one of the well-known or famous people of his time. He was no celebrity. He had no grand ambitions to be anything but a faithful human being. Yet God often accomplishes his work through such individuals.

We also learn from the life of Joseph that God entrusts his most precious gifts to human beings. Joseph was given the gift and had the responsibility for nurturing the most priceless gift of God to the world — the savior, Jesus Christ.

But God also continually gives us, separately and together, some very precious gifts which we are to nurture and protect. For example, we've each been given the gift of freedom. Throughout our lives we have the opportunity to use our freedom for the good or to give it over to someone else and thereby misuse it. All the time we have the freedom to accept or reject other people. Too often I see individuals too quickly using their freedom to reject rather than accept.

Connected to this precious gift of freedom is the gift of love. With the power of love, we can bring life and hope to other peop1e and when we withho1d our 1cbve and acceptance we can bring sorrow and hopelessness to others.

God gives each one of us priceless gifts which we are to use for the good. Like Joseph, we are to nurture these L precious gifts.

What God did with Joseph, Jesus did with other human beings. He helped them fulfill their potential. Jesus took people who up to that point had seen themselves as worthless and without power and he inspired them to take responsibility for their lives and gifts as never before.

And when people begin to do that, miracles happen. He said to the farmers and fishermen and artisans of Galilee that they were to repent of the negative self-images that they had allowed others to put on them, and beli.ve the good news of who they really were and could become under God. Jesus was effective in getting people to act on the best that was in them, rather than the worst. The church today is called to do the same as Jesus did with people.

Thus my continual dream and vision for First-Plymouth is that it will be a place where bumbling. and fumbling are not condemned and rejected — a church that is open to all people no matter who or what they are, or what their problems are. I want people to find compassion here, forgiveness of their sins, and understanding of their weaknesses.

That’s what Christmas is all about — it’s about accepting and loving and helping the forgotten people in our midst. It’s about giving and receiving the gifts of kindness and understanding, peace and good will. With God’s Spirit, we can do it!