Sunday, December 12, 1982
JOSEPH (A First-Person Sermon)
Matthew 1:18-25

All of you here this morning are now preparing to celebrate Christmas, the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. In order that you may know more about his birth and how it came to be, I want you to hear the story from one who participated in the event, Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus and the husband of Mary.

Little is known about Joseph, but from what we do know, this is the way I think Joseph experience it. Listen then as Joseph tells his story in his own words.

I was born in the village of Nazareth in an area of Palestine which is called Galilee. My father was a carpenter and he taught me the trade at an early age. The family from which I come can trace its ancestry back forty-one generations to King David. And just like Joseph in the Old Testament stories, my father's name was also Jacob.

Nazareth, where I lived is a beautiful place in norther Palestine, about 1300 feet above sea level and located 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee, and twenty miles east of the Mediterranean Sea.

Although I grew up in Nazareth, all my ancestors came from Bethlehem, located in Judea. My father and mother both died while I was yet a young man and so I was left alone in Nazareth, and there I continued the trade of carpentry.

Life in a small town can be lonely without a family and I wanted a family of my own very much. While still a young man, I came to know a young woman named Mary, who lived on the edge of the village. Her father's name was Joachim and her mother's name, Anna. After going through the proscribed customs and traditions, I became engaged to Mary. I was then about 20 years old, and Mary was almost 17. Following the engagement, we set the wedding date for six months later. I'm sure that I was the happiest man in the whole village.

Mary also came from a family which traced its ancestry back to some of the patriarchs of Israel. She had a cousin whose husband was a priest in a town near Jerusalem. Near the time of our engagement her family received news that her cousin's husband, Zechariah the priest, had been chosen for service in the Temple in Jerusalem, a high honor for a country priest. The first time he was to be on duty and burn the incense at the altar was an especially high honor, so Mary's family was invited to be in Jerusalem for the occasion. I was invited by Mary's family to go along on the trip.

Never before had I been to the holy city. In fact, in all my life I had never been more than ten miles outside the town of Nazareth. It was a trip I eagerly looked forward to and in addition I would be traveling with my future wife and her family.

So, one brisk day in the Palestinian spring, the four of us set off on our trip to Jerusalem. It would be a three-day journey on foot. I'll never forget my first look at the holy city as it came into our view. It's a feeling that is difficult to describe.

Once inside the city, I was surprised at the sounds and smells of the narrow streets. The reek and feculence and foulness, the unutterable stink of the Jerusalem streets was in my nostrils even as I stared at the ivory and gold glories of Herod's palace on the western hill.

But it was the area of the Holy Temple that impressed me more than anything else. What a beautiful inspiring place. It was hard for me to believe that I was standing near the very spot that David had built the altar and where Solomon had reared the magnificent temple that had stood for nearly 400 years until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. As a carpenter, I was particularly impressed with the workmanship. For although the temple had been destroyed, then rebuilt, and then destroyed again, this third rebuilding had restored it to its original glory.

Inside the temple, I watched as Zechariah the priest went through the ancient rituals. I watched as he turned and faced the congregation and scattered the incense. I watched too as he disappeared into the tabernacle, the holy place, and then waited for his return for the final blessing. It seemed as if he was gone for a long time. When he returned, he was pale and shaken. He could barely walk. And he had lost his voice. He could only make signs with his hands.

We returned with Zechariah to his home and there he wrote us notes that told us he had seen a vision and had been told that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son whose name was to be John and that his son would be a prophet to prepare the people for the coming Messiah. Because Zechariah doubted that this could happen, he had been told that he would not be able to speak again until the son was born.

The next day we began our journey back to Nazareth and this event was uppermost in our minds.

Not long after, Mary and her parents received the news that indeed her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant. That was just the beginning of strange happenings in my life.

Mary and I had now set our wedding date, but I was not prepared for the coming surprised. A few days later, Mary's parents came to me with the news that Mary had left unexpectedly that morning for a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Why she had gone so suddenly, they did not know. Then again, a few days after that, they told me that Mary had sent word that she had arrived safely and would stay with Elizabeth until the baby was born.

Three months later, Mary returned to Nazareth, and she came to see me immediately. Seeing her again, I knew there was something different about her. She said at this first meeting that she had something important to tell me and then openly and simply she said, "Joseph, I am with child." If the world had broken into two parts and dropped away into bottomless space, her words could not have sounded more unlikely. She had spoken softly and without guilt or shame in her voice.

I didn't know how to respond. What was there to say? There were so many questions in my mind I didn't know which one to ask first. All I could say was, "How? When? Who?"

Her only answer was spoken in a quiet tone, "It is from God. It is not from any man; it is from God."

Then before I could speak again, she told me in detail of the vision she had several months earlier and that it was following this vision that she felt compelled to visit her cousin Elizabeth

who by this time was six months pregnant. Mary's vision had told here that she was to be the mother of the "promised one." Step by step, Mary told me of the incredible happening in her life. She said that Elizabeth had understood at once when she told her the same story.

I didn't know what to believe. My beloved Mary, pregnant. What was I to do? I didn't want to cause her any embarrassment. "Do not panic!" I told myself over and over again. I needed time to think. I told Mary this and promised that we would talk again the next day and that together we would figure out what to do.

That night was a long one for me. I could not sleep at first. I knew Mary would not make up such a story, yet how could it have happened? My family had not been overly religious, but as I was growing up, I did learn the traditions of our faith, the Psalms and prayers and prophecies.

I began to recite some of my favorite Psalms and prayers, hoping in that way to quiet the storm within me. I know the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah — that a virgin was to have a child. But now? Here? Was Mary that young woman?

Finally, I fell asleep. And then like my ancestor, the Joseph in the Old Testament, I had a dream. It was so real, so complete that I remember it in detail till this day. In my dream, I was told by a messenger of God not to be afraid to be married to Mary; that the child was to be a very special person and that his name was to be Jesus. Then the dream ended. "Do not be afraid."

Now I knew what I was to do. I would take Mary as my wife, and I would no longer be afraid. Let the villagers carry on their gossip. I would do my best to be understanding and patient. I knew that my faith would need to grow stronger, but I was also convinced that God would be with me and with my new family.

We were married shortly thereafter in a simple wedding in the home of Mary's parents.

In the coming months, I often found myself thinking about the child that Mary was carrying. What would he be like? Would I be a good enough father? When Mary and I were alone in the evenings, we often talked of the future and the responsibilities that were ours. We knew we had to be patients and trust God above all else.

In the ninth month of Mary's pregnancy, we heard of a command that had been issued from Rome, concerning an empire-wide census. The orders for this huge undertaking came down straight from the emperor himself, an imperial command from Caesar Augustus. For the taking of this census, each household was to return to the village or city from which his ancestors had come. For me that meant a journey to Bethlehem, and since Mary's family had also come from the same region, she too would have to make the journey.

We began to make hasty preparations for the trip. There was a deadline that had to be met. The sooner we got there and back, the better. From Nazareth to Bethlehem is a distance of 75 miles. Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna would make the trip with us since they also had to be in Bethlehem for the census.

The roads were crowded as we traveled. It would take us three days for the journey. I was apprehensive because I knew the time for the baby to be born was getting close. Yet we both remembered the words of the visions, "Do not be afraid." That was our constant comfort as we traveled.

Near the evening of the third day, we could see the town of Bethlehem on the horizon, and we knew that our journey was almost complete. As we were making our steep climb into the village, I felt Mary's hand tighten in mine. It must be that the child is ready to be born, I thought.

As we entered the streets of Bethlehem, I was worried more and more about finding a place to spend the night. We stopped at several places which had rooms to rent, and all were filled. At the last inn, I asked again and was told, "no room." I pleaded with the innkeeper that my wife was ready to have her baby and that we needed a place desperately. Finally, he told us we could stay in the stable behind the inn. It was a roomy cave and provided some protection.

We were barely settled there when Mary knew it was time for the baby's birth. Fortunately, her mother was there to help. I didn't know what to do. Joachim and I waited outside the stable while Mary and her mother stayed inside. It wasn't long before we heard the cry of the new baby. We rushed inside and as I knelt beside Mary; she lifted our son into my arms. Every parent who has gazed at a newborn baby is aware that a miracle has occurred. I was no different. Tears of joy came down my face.

At this point, I was not thinking about the baby being the "Promised One" of God. I was simply happy that the mother and baby were fine. There had been no reassurance from God for a long time. It was almost nine months since Mary had had her vision and more than six months since I had my unforgettable dream. Was it not strange that the baby had been born so quietly and without fanfare in an out-of-the-way stable? Only the sounds of the animals could be heard.

Soon Mary and the baby were sleeping peacefully, but I could not sleep. After several hours, I heard knocking on the stable door. Unfastening the latch, I opened the top half of the door and looked out. There stood a small group of men. "Who are you," I asked. "We are shepherds from the hills on the edge of town," they replied. "What do you want?" I asked. "Was there a child born here tonight" they wanted to know. "Why do you ask?" I countered. "Do not be afraid," the shepherds replied. There were those words again, "Do not be afraid." I said, "A child has been born here just a few hours ago." "It is true then," the shepherds said to one another.

Then they told me about the marvelous and unbelievable sight they had seen a bright light in the sky and angels singing and a voice which told them to go to Bethlehem and in a manger they would find a baby — "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

I invited them quickly into the stable and joyfully showed them Mary and the baby. After they left, I felt a peace and a joy that I had never known before.

There is so much more I could tell you about the baby, and about Mary, about his boyhood and his growing up. There were wise men who came to visit weeks later and soon after that we had to flee to Egypt in order to save the baby's life. After several years we were able to return to Nazareth where the child grew strong in wisdom and in stature.

My own life was never the same again. Now I knew that God often works through ordinary unlikely people. God chooses individuals that we ourselves might not choose. Who was I but a simple carpenter and yet I was to participate in one of the greatest events ever to happen in

this world. God often entrusts his most precious gifts to human beings. The love of God became flesh and lived among us. Can there be any greater happening in all of history? “Do not be afraid.” Amen.