Sunday, December 23, 2001
**JOSEPH'S STORY**
Matthew 1:18-25

There are two Christmas stories in the New Testament, one in the Gospel of Matthew and the other in the Gospel of Luke. In today's scripture reading, you heard the story as Matthew remembers it. It's a very brief account of the birth of Jesus. The first sentence sums it up: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

Matthew's account is the more down-to-earth story of the birth of Jesus and gives us more information about Joseph, the husband-to-be of Mary. Most of what we know about Joseph appears in this story. He was a "righteous" man, Matthew says, and completely unwilling to expose Mary to "public disgrace" because she was pregnant. Then, because of an angel's advice in a dream, he married Mary instead of breaking the engagement as he had planned.

Since we know very little beyond this about Joseph, here's my version of Joseph's story as I imagine it took place and as I think he would tell it in his own words.

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

The town of Nazareth, where I lived, is a beautiful place in northern Palestine, about 1300 feet above sea level and located 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee, and 29 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 still a young man, so I was left alone in Nazareth, where I continued the trade of carpentry.

Life in a small town can be lonely without a family, and I wanted very much to have a family of my own. 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 prescribed customs and traditions, I became engaged to Mary. I was then about 22 years old, and she was 17. Following the engagement, we set the marriage date for six months later.

Mary also came from a family that traced its history back to some of the patriarchs of Israel. She had a cousin named Elizabeth, whose husband was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. His name was Zechariah. They lived in a small town on the outskirts of the city. Near the time of our engagement, her family received the news that her cousin's husband had been chosen for the high honor of burning incense at the altar in the temple. Mary and her family were invited to be in Jerusalem for this important occasion, and I was asked to travel with them. I had never before been in 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 looked forward to. I still remember the spring day in Galilee when we started our journey to Jerusalem. I'll never forget my first view of the holy city as it came into sight.

Once inside the city, I was surprised at the sounds and smells of the narrow, crowded streets. But it was the area of the Holy Temple that impressed me the most. What a beautiful, inspiring place. It was hard for me to believe that I was standing near the spot where David built an altar and where Solomon had built the magnificent temple that had stood for nearly 400 years until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. As a carpenter, I was especially 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 was fascinated 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 in the temple and had been told that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son whose name was to be John and that this man would be a prophet to prepare the people for the coming Messiah. Because Zechariah doubted that this could happen, he had been told in the vision that he would not be able to speak again until the child was born.

The next day we began our journey back to Nazareth. Not long after, Mary and her parents received the news that indeed her cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, was pregnant. That was only the beginning of strange happenings in my life.

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

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

I didn't know what 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 words were spoken in a quiet voice, "It is from God, a child of the Holy Spirit. It is not from any man."

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, this visit from an angel of God, that she felt compelled to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who by this time was six months pregnant. Mary's vision had told her that she was to be the mother of the "Promised One." Step by step, she told me of the incredible happenings 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 supposed 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 and stories of our faith, the psalms, prayers, and prophecies.

I began to recite some of my favorite psalms and prayers, hoping to quiet the storm within me. I knew some of the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Finally, I fell asleep. And then, like my ancestor Joseph, who is remembered in the book of Genesis, I had a dream. It was so real, so complete, that I remember it in detail to this day. In my dream, I was told by a messenger of God not to be afraid to marry Mary; that the child she carried was to be a very special person, and that his name was to be Jesus, and that he would be the promised Savior. The dream kept assuring me, “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.”

Now I knew what God wanted me to do. I would take Mary as my wife and 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 ceremony 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 father? When Mary and I were alone in the evening, we frequently talked of the future and the responsibilities that were ours. We knew we had to be patient and trust God above all else.

In the ninth month of Mary’s pregnancy, we got news of a command that had been issued from Rome concerning an empire-wide census. The orders for this huge undertaking came straight from Caesar Augustus. For the census, each household was to return to the village or city from which their 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 our 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 was a distance of about 75 miles. Mary’s parents would be traveling with us since they also had to be there for the census.

The roads were crowded as we traveled. It would take about three days for the journey. I was apprehensive because Mary and I both knew the time for the baby to be born was getting close. Yet we both remembered the words of our 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 could feel Mary’s hand tighten in mine. It must be that the child is ready to be born, I thought to myself. As we entered the village, I was more and more worried about finding a place to spend the night. We stopped at several places that had rooms to rent, but all were filled. At the last place, I asked again and was told, “no room available.” I told the owner that

my wife was ready to have her baby and we needed a place desperately. Finally, he told us we could stay in a stable behind the house. It was a roomy hillside cave and provided some protection.

We were barely settled 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. Mary's dad and I stayed 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 taken place. Tears of joy rolled down my face.

There is so much more I could tell you about the baby and about Mary, about his boyhood and growing up. There were shepherds who came to visit later that night after having seen a vision of angels. They too were told, "Do not be afraid." There were wise men who came to visit many days later after we had moved into a house. Not long after, I was warned by a message from God in another dream that our son was in danger. We had to flee to Egypt because Herod had threatened to kill the baby. After being in Egypt for a time, we returned to Nazareth, where our child grew in wisdom and stature.

My own life was never the same again. Now I knew that God frequently works through ordinary, unlikely people. God chooses people whom we ourselves might not choose.

There is a lot of talk today about what makes Christmas. Newspaper and television advertisements coax people into believing that they can have a real Christmas by going to a festive shopping center, eating at trendy restaurants, or watching glittering Christmas specials on television. Others believe that Christmas is made by the fastidious keeping of time-honored family rituals, choosing the perfect Christmas tree, eating food from a menu that has been handed down for generations, visiting the same relatives in precisely the same order on Christmas day. All of these can be beautiful and helpful.

But the answer to "What makes Christmas?" is found in human history. It is found in such places as Joseph's story. Because he cooperated with God's actions in human history, he made a world of difference. Although he did not have complete knowledge of the future, and because he was willing to do more than law or custom required, more than what was expected of him, he became an instrument of God. When given a chance, he was willing to step up and believe in a God who can make something good out of a scandal.

Above all, remember God's words to Joseph, "Do not be afraid." Amen.