

Joseph: Keeping Vigil
Matthew 1:18-25
December 24, 2006

Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and author, tells about an experience he had as chaplain of the Holland-American cruise line:

I was standing on the bridge of a huge Dutch ocean liner which was trying to find its way through a thick fog into the port of Rotterdam. The fog was so thick, in fact, that the steersman could not even see the bow of the ship. The captain, carefully listening to a radar station operator who was explaining his position between other ships, walked nervously up and down the bridge and shouted his orders to the steersman. When he suddenly stumbled over me, he blurted out, "Damn it, Father, get out of my way." But when I was ready to run away, filled with feelings of incompetence and guilt, he came back and said, "Why don't you just stay around. This might be the only time I really need you."¹

Have you ever been made to feel out of place or in the way? Perhaps you've felt helpless and incompetent in a situation where others took charge and you awkwardly slipped away or tried to fade into the background. Have you ever been the last one to be told what was happening in a crisis that would reshape your life and impact your future?

If you've had such an experience, then you know how Joseph felt as he played his role in the Christmas drama. Joseph seems like an innocent bystander in this story, yet his world is turned upside down by this divine intervention.

Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married but are not living together. After a year of engagement he will go to bring her to live in his parents' home. In the meantime, they are simply getting to know one another, or so Joseph thought. Suddenly his world is shattered as he hears the news that Mary is pregnant. This is against the holy law. Joseph is embarrassed. He cannot tolerate such disrespect for the law, and yet he cares for Mary. Joseph has two options: a public divorce would humiliate Mary, but vindicate his own name; or a private divorce would protect Mary but leave him vulnerable to the ridicule of friends and townspeople.

Joseph is a righteous man, dedicated to obeying the Jewish law. He is a man of character, of integrity and honor. He wants to obey the Law and honor God, but he also wants to minimize the impact to Mary. He tempers justice with mercy. He chooses to divorce her privately to "save face" for Mary.

His choice is made but he decides to sleep on it. As he sleeps, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. Through this messenger, God encourages Joseph to proceed with his plans to marry Mary. He is also given the name for the child, Jesus, meaning “God saves,” and Joseph is assured that this child will save the people from their sins. Joseph trusts the dream and follows through with the marriage. When the child is born, he names him Jesus, as the angel instructed. In the naming, Joseph claims the child as his own. He receives Jesus as his son and raises him in the way of faith and righteousness.

In Joseph’s life we find guidance for our own lives, especially for those times when life throws us unexpected curves. Sometimes our lives are interrupted and we find ourselves waiting for a diagnosis. We may find ourselves keeping vigil beside a loved one through a difficult crisis or a protracted illness. We may find ourselves pushed to the background while others take control. Someone has said, “Trouble is the only flavor life comes in.” We learn from Joseph how to keep vigil in the midst of troubled times.

Keeping vigil means never giving up on God, even when we don’t understand or like what is happening. Had Joseph given up on God, he would have divorced Mary and let her bear the humiliation of this startling change of events. But Joseph is a man of faith, of deep faith. Both Joseph and Mary are committed to God even more strongly than they are committed to one another. Once God’s purpose is revealed, they are willing to obey God no matter what the cost in public opinion and personal adjustment. They accept their part in God’s larger plan for the salvation of all humanity.

Joseph doesn’t give up on God. He gazes with the eyes of faith until he sees how God is at work in this state of affairs. Joseph recognizes the sacred possibilities even in tragic circumstances. It takes great faith to see God’s hand at work in the midst of calamity, to accept that God is with us just as much through unexpected and unpleasant situations as God is in the joys and blessings of life.

Trust in God is difficult to maintain when the shadows fall around us, health fails, tragedy strikes, or relationships of love end in betrayal and alienation. It is easy at such times to give up on God and blame God for failing us. Misfortune does not necessarily lead us to greater faith in God; it might also foster bitterness and lead to separation from God. We need examples like Joseph to inspire us to keep the faith even when much around us discourages us from trusting God. Because Joseph trusted God, he beheld the miracle of Jesus’ birth and experienced the birth of new life in his own life through his son’s ministry.

John Claypool tells of a visit he made to a hospital where a woman had just been told that her husband had inoperable cancer and that he had only a few weeks to live. With amazing courage and stamina, the woman's response was a model of confidence and hope:

"I'm not going to pass judgment on this until God gets through with it. We have no idea what may come of this situation. Things may not be as bad as the surgeon thinks. There may be an act of healing, or some unexpected form of good may result from Henry's illness. It's too soon to tell just now. The goodness and mercy of God has followed us all the days of our lives, and God will not forsake us now."²

Keeping vigil means never giving up on God.

Keeping vigil also means learning to love more deeply. In those days parents arranged marriages for their children. Joseph and Mary did not necessarily know one another before their engagement. They were chosen for one another because it was a good economic arrangement for their families. When Mary's pregnancy was revealed, Joseph's initial response was to follow the law, which would lead him to abandon her. But by that time Joseph must have also had some feelings for Mary. He allowed love to take precedence over law. While he didn't let concern for persons collapse his moral standards, neither did he allow his commitment to standards preclude his compassion for others. He allowed mercy to season justice.

A vigil of waiting often allows us time and space for love to grow deeper, a time when perspective is clarified, when priorities are reordered. Interruptions may cause us to discover what matters most and what does not, what we are mission and what we are wasting, what makes life worth living and worth dying for. Troubled times can be opportunities to learn to love more deeply.

One Christmas Eve a man came out of his office to find a young boy named Paul admiring the man's shiny new car.

"Is this your car, Mister?" Paul asked.

The man nodded, "My brother gave it to me for Christmas."

Paul looked astounded. "You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn't cost you nothing? Gosh, I wish..."

Paul hesitated, and the man knew what he was going to wish. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the lad said jarred the man all the way down to his heels. "I wish," the boy went on, "that I could be a brother like that."

The man looked at the boy in astonishment, then impulsively he added, "Would you like to ride in my car?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love that!"

After a short ride Paul turned, and with his eyes aglow said, “Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?”

The man smiled a little. He thought he knew what the lad wanted. He wanted to show his neighbors that he could ride home in a big car. But he was wrong again.

“Will you stop right where those two steps are?” the boy asked.

Paul ran up the steps. Soon the man heard him coming back, but he was not coming fast. He was carrying his little disabled brother. He sat down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed up against the lame child and pointed to the car.

“There she is, Buddy, just like I told you upstairs. His brother gave it to him for Christmas, and it didn’t cost him a cent, and someday I’m gonna give you one just like it, then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Christmas windows that I’ve been trying to tell you about.”

The man got out of his car. “Why don’t we start seeing them right now,” he said, and lifted the little lad on to the front seat of his car. The shining-eyed older brother climbed in beside him and the three of them began a memorable holiday ride.³

Keeping vigil with another through illness, hardship or crisis can be a time for love to grow deeper. That’s what it meant for Joseph and for Paul, and that’s what it can be for us as well.

Although he was caught in an embarrassing situation, Joseph graciously accepted his role in the divine drama. From Joseph we learn that when life throws us a curve ball, we can keep vigil by never giving up on God and by learning to love more deeply. May we be so faithful in the vigils we are called to keep.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 86.

² Quoted by Maxie Dunnam, *More Than Conquerors* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1988), pp. 21-22.

³ C. Roy Angell, "A Brother Like That," in *Follow the Year: A Celebration of Family Holidays*, by Mala Powers (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 35.

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