

Characters of Christmas: Joseph

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, Bramar Baptist. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my privilege to be the lead pastor here. And this morning, as we begin the season of Advent, you see a wreath and candles up at the front.

The wreath itself, shaped in a perfect circle, symbolizes the eternity of God. Each candle has a significance as well.

And on each Sunday of the Advent season, we'll recognize one of the four virtues that Jesus brings to us. Hope, love, joy, and peace.

And this morning, I'm lighting the first candle, which symbolizes hope. Good answer. Someone knew the answer. Isaiah 9, verses 2, 6, and 7 says, The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders.

[1 : 15] He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Our first candle represents hope. As I mentioned last week, we're taking a bit of a break from our larger sermon series that we've been doing in the story as we head into the Christmas season.

Believe it or not, I'm going to freak you out, Christmas is only three and a half weeks away. Gulp! Isn't that crazy? I was thinking about that this week.

Certainly here in our church, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, isn't it? And thanks to everyone who came to help decorate the church this past Friday.

[2 : 22] Pat and Larry and Gertie and Daryl and Marina and Del and Kathy and Vern and Rita. Thanks so much. Round of applause. Thank you.

It's my favorite time of the year and it feels so good in here. So also, I want to thank Kevin and Pastor Luwam and Len and Larry because we have, look up, way up, a brand new projector mount.

We have a projector mount that is the way a projector mount is supposed to be. It's safe. It's functional. Yay! It's the little things that make me happy.

I keep telling them that. So during this time of year, many of us are likely busy planning get-togethers, right? We're planning get-togethers with family and friends. And our family, we've already been to a Christmas gathering of family and friends, and we have another one that we're going to today.

So I enjoy it, but it's, ooh, it's a lot. And then we'll also be traveling south to visit Michelle's family. And before you get too envious, when I say traveling south, it's not as exotic as it sounds.

- [3 : 32] It's Lethbridge. Good time. Six-hour drive. Good time. And so maybe some of us are starting to get stressed, right? You're starting to worry about the perfect gift for someone. We're hoping that someone will get, even better, the perfect gift for you. So it can be a hectic time of year for some of us, a time for others of loneliness and even pain. For some people, the Christmas season can actually be the loneliest time of the year. The song says it's the most wonderful time of the year, but for some people, it's not. Christmas season can also mark a time not only of anticipating what we'll receive or give to someone else, but a time when we might reflect on something that we have personally lost. I think about my folks at Christmas. That's reality. Do you feel pressure during the Christmas season?
- [4 : 38] Do you feel a vague sense of expectation in some way to have the perfect Christmas? Oh, this year we're ready. We're going to have the perfect Christmas. That's a lot of pressure. Do you have a sense that in some way, if you don't achieve that vague and unrealistic measurement of the perfect Christmas, that you've somehow failed? While we may think of the elderly when we picture that sad thought of someone having a lonely Christmas, this will be surprising, I think. New research from an organization called MIND has found that it's actually millennials who are most at risk of being or feeling alone over Christmas. In fact, they're twice as likely as the elderly to have no one to spend Christmas with. Your online relationships, your online friendships, are not as real as you might think for young people. It's surprising, isn't it? In a poll of over 2,000 people, MIND found that one in 10 millennials, and millennials means those who are the ages of 25 and 34 in that age group, say that they have no one to spend Christmas with compared to one in 20 older people, meaning those over 65.
- [6 : 11] One in 10 versus one in 20. And researchers also say that many people worry about their finances over Christmas, in addition to potentially feeling alone. Others tend to dwell on things that they believe they failed to achieve during the year. An animated Christmas special debuted on CBS on December 9, 1965. I've watched it probably almost every year since I was little. A Charlie Brown Christmas. Many of you will know this story and the characters, but the main character, a young boy named Charlie Brown, makes a confession to his friend Linus. I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. Charlie Brown ponders and finally exclaims in frustration, isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about? It's his good friend Linus who responds, sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.
- [7 : 31] The true meaning of Christmas. It's a phrase that's become a cliché, and I think that in our society, it's become a bit vague, as Christmas seems to mean so many things to so many people. But as Christ followers, people who believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born in a little town called Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, that is what Christmas is all about. At this time of year, particularly in the church, we begin to hear this word Advent. And it's important to recognize that Advent is not a when, but a what.

It's a thing. It's a noun. Generally, the noun Advent is used for the introduction of something important.

The 20th century saw the advent of many important inventions, including antibiotics, airplanes, cars, personal computers, microwave dinners.

[8 : 42] If the word is capitalized, it has a religious meaning, capital A Advent. And it refers to the period that is observed in certain Christian denominations.

And it's the period that begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, and you guessed it, that's today. Not all Protestant churches recognize it in a formal way.

And other traditions recognize this time by lighting candles, as we've done this morning, that represent the concepts of hope, peace, love, and joy.

And as we approach Christmas this year and reflect on all the season means to us as Christians, beyond spending time with family and friends, giving and receiving gifts, holidays, carols, delicious food, our sermon series over the next four weeks will be characters of Christmas.

And over the course of this series, as we explore the meaning of Christmas and the events that surround it, we'll be looking at it from four different perspectives. Joseph, Mary, Herod, believe it or not, stay tuned, and the wise men.

[10 : 01] So what pictures do we have in our heads when we think of Joseph, the man who was betrothed to Mary who would be the earthly father of Jesus, the Son of God?

We're first introduced to Joseph in the book of Matthew right at the very beginning as the focal point of an important family line, the family line of Jesus.

the Messiah. And it's kind of neat that we're introduced to Joseph in the book of Matthew by beginning with his ancestors. Because this list of names begins with Abraham and continues through many of the names that we've taken a closer look at in our sermon series on the story.

Over 14 generations. 14. Then the Bible says in Matthew 1.16, after this long list of names and many the father of's, we come to a short phrase at the end of that long list of names that can be easily missed.

Let's read this together. It's a short phrase. And Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who was called the Messiah.

[11 : 23] Joseph's name stands out clearly in that long list of people because it's his genealogy that's included in the line of Jesus.

While Mary was chosen by God to give birth to Jesus, it was Joseph's family that connected Jesus with the line of David as the prophecies foretold.

I think we often see Joseph as somehow a side character in the Christmas story. Don't we? Maybe not quite as important as the angels?

The shepherds, maybe? The wise men? When you think of Joseph, do you think of him as a wise older man or a teenager with much of his life still ahead of him?

It's interesting to me that the usual depictions we see of Mary and Joseph are often as an older couple in their late 30s and even 40s. But scholars suggest it's far more likely that Mary and Joseph were in their teens Mary may have been around 15, 16 in that range and Joseph 17 or 18.

[12 : 44] The Bible tells us that Joseph was a carpenter. Certainly not a high-paying or prestigious job. But one that would have provided for himself and for his family.

And to me, the fact that Joseph was a carpenter actually suggests quite a few things that may help us to get to know him better. He was likely a hard worker, dependable, perhaps creative and thoughtful.

But as a carpenter, he may also have been focused or quiet or logical. And if we consider the idea of a younger Joseph, this would mean he had committed himself to learning a trade.

Perhaps one that had been passed on to him by his own father or another skilled master craftsman in the area. Like so many of us, Joseph likely had great plans for his own future and the future of his family.

and likely at least some plans for what he wanted to do with his life. He may have pictured the perfect wedding to the woman that he loved.

[14 : 08] Building a home together and having children. And we read in Matthew chapter 1 that Joseph and Mary were betrothed.

The Bible uses that word. And this idea is much more than a promise ring or some idea of future plans together. In a sense, they were pledged to one another.

They had committed to one another. Their parents had met. Their parents had spoken. A dowry, likely very small if not non-existent, would have been talked about.

This was a done deal. And then, the news. The Bible says in Matthew 1.18, let's read this together.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 14] I think we may tend to gloss over this a bit. Because even if Mary and Joseph were in their teens, they would have known how things worked.

Joseph would have known quite clearly that if he had not slept with Mary, and yet she was pregnant, we can imagine that to say the least, Joseph would have been shocked and quite likely hurt when he initially heard that news.

At first glance, the circumstances would have pointed to a mistake on Mary's part. Perhaps not quite as extreme as adultery, as they were not married yet.

But as they had been promised to one another, it would have been a serious offense that would have drawn a lot of negative attention to not only Mary, but to her family and to Joseph.

From one perspective, Joseph would have been justified in calling attention to the situation and putting the full blame on Mary. Because really, after all, he had done nothing wrong.

[16 : 41] While Mary and Joseph were essentially only engaged at this point by today's standards, at that time, as I alluded to earlier, it was considered that their relationship could only be broken by death or divorce.

And because Mary and Joseph were engaged, Mary's apparent unfaithfulness caused a severe social stigma. According to Jewish civil law, Joseph had a right to divorce her and the Jewish authorities could have had her stoned to death.

One account that I read says that if a woman was found in these circumstances, she would have likely been led to a tall place and told to jump, whether on her own or being pushed, if she survived the fall, the villagers could then stone her from that point.

But something very different happened. The Bible says in Matthew 1.19, let's read this together.

because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

[18 : 14] It's here that we see the depth of Joseph's character, his kindness, perhaps even his love for Mary. But what else do we learn about Joseph in this situation?

situation? We know that he had been thinking quietly about divorcing her to make the best of a really bad situation. The Bible says in Matthew 1.20, let's read this together, But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save the people from their sins. has an angel ever spoken to you in a dream?

Or have you ever gotten a really clear sense that God was pointing you in a specific direction? Could you imagine what it would be like to have a dream like this, that we read about in Scripture, that Joseph was visited in a dream?

Most often I, personally, I find I dream about silly things. or stressful things. I've certainly never had the privilege of being spoken to by an angel of the Lord in a dream.

[19 : 49] At least not that I'm aware of. Joseph could have easily woken up from this dream and said, wow, that was weird. Guess I shouldn't eat hummus that late.

And just written it off. But without Joseph having to say a word, have you ever noticed that no words of Joseph are recorded in the Bible accounts, by the way?

We see something important in his response. The Bible says in Matthew 1.24, let's read this together, when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary home as his wife.

But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son, and he gave him the name Jesus. When Joseph woke up, he didn't ponder and puzzle over the dream.

He didn't overthink it. Do you overthink things? I do. He didn't seem to experience any anxiety over how God was changing his own plans for his life.

[21 : 01] He obeyed. That simple action speaks volumes about Joseph. He was clearly a man who believed in God, because he obeyed a command of God without hesitation.

And he trusted that God's plan for his life. No matter how much it differed from the plans that he had for his own life, his family, his future, he trusted that God's plans were better.

And he didn't hesitate to trust and obey. It's a song that played when I was baptized as a kid. For there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

As I said earlier, I think we tend to see Joseph as a side character in the story of Jesus' birth. But he was far more than simply Jesus' earthly stepdad.

Scripture tells us that following the command from the angel, it's Joseph who names the baby Jesus. We see in Joseph a kind of person who is a caring husband, a caring father, and whose deep faith and trust in God allowed him to step into a situation that, at least from an earthly perspective, drastically changed his personal plans.

[22 : 38] A situation that involved trusting God against all odds, and even in a basic sense, it looked really, really humiliating.

But just as God chose Mary, we need to recognize that God chose Joseph as well. It wasn't somehow a fluke that Joseph became Jesus' earthly father.

Yes, Mary was chosen, we get that, and then there was Joseph. No, absolutely not. Scripture is clear, Joseph was chosen. Joseph became Jesus' earthly father, and the man who would teach him, the man who would mentor him as he grew up.

Why was Jesus a carpenter? I'll give you one guess. Joseph. And as we talked about last week, only God sees the inside.

Only God sees our heart, our intentions, our character. As we've looked at Joseph as our first character of Christmas this morning, I have some questions for you.

[23 : 55] How do you react when your plans don't go the way you want? Do you pout? Do you procrastinate?

Do you panic? or are you willing to weather the storms of life because you trust the one who calms them?

Can you see your life and your own plans through the lens of God's greater plans for you? With peace, with perseverance, purpose, and purpose, as people who claim to follow God and seek his will for our lives, are we willing to trust?

Are we willing to let God have control over our circumstances, our plans, our ultimate destiny? when it comes right down to it, are we following our own way and looking to do what we want?

Or are we willing to trust God in our circumstances, no matter how scary things may be? When we say that we're willing to trust God, or even that we do trust God, when it comes right down to it, are we willing to fully surrender to God and his plan, for our lives?

[25 : 31] Joseph trusted and surrendered, even in the face of losing everything. When it came right down to it, Joseph was willing to risk his own plans, his reputation, his personal goals and desires, even his future, because he knew that God was in control, and that ultimately God's plan, no matter how it looked to him in the moment, would be the best for him and his family.

May we be like Joseph. May we trust God in the unknown, and be willing to fully give ourselves to his plans and purpose for our lives.

As we celebrate communion together this morning, I want us to recognize the significance of this Advent season, absolutely, and what it means for us in the birth of Jesus.

But I also want us to recognize what it means for another Advent as well, which will be the return of Christ to redeem and restore all of creation.

That can happen, amen. It's through communion that we recognize the birth of Christ began a story that continued through his death and resurrection, and will one day conclude with his return.

[27 : 15] We've talked about the importance of what's inside that matters most, and the Bible tells us that we need to take a good, long look at what's going on in our hearts when we partake of the Lord's Supper.

In 1 Corinthians 11 28, the Apostle Paul wrote, Let a person examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. Eating and drinking them vividly depicts our union and solidarity with Christ as our Savior, our Lord, and our source of spiritual life.

We should also take the time to examine ourselves to ensure that our relationship with Christ is authentic and genuine.

Not only recalling the beginning of our relationship with Christ, but also seeking to discover if there's any unconfessed sin that's getting in the way of our current fellowship with God.

And lastly, it would be wrong for us to eat the bread and drink the cup of Christ without a heart that is purposely and intentionally thankful.

[28 : 33] As you take the bread and cup this morning, do it with a grateful heart that can say along with generations of Christians, thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift.

As we celebrate communion together this morning, we approach this table, as I always say, not as a Brammer Baptist Church table, but as the Lord's table to which he calls us to freely come.

Now let's take a moment of quiet reflection before we come to the table together.