

**“Joseph’s Makeover”**  
**St James Presbyterian Church**  
**Bellingham, WA**

**Gerald K. Poole**  
**December 7, 2008**

Isaiah 7: 10-16 & Matthew 1: 18-25

Most of us have sung the Christmas carols telling the story of the birth of our savior. We have read the biblical narrative and think we know exactly how it happened. It makes a beautiful story.

For years I have been interested in Joseph, partly I’m sure because he was a dad who was to oversee a very auspicious birth. He needed to be sure every detail of the mother’s and child’s care was addressed. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Joseph faced a big challenge when Mary, his betrothed, told him she was going to have a child by the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. He loved her. But at first he did not believe her explanation for her pregnancy. If a woman was found to be unfaithful to her betrothed, the marriage would be ended. The lawful consequence would be public disgrace.

Joseph wanted to spare Mary from that so he decided he would quietly divorce her. The text further tells us that an angel visited Joseph in a dream and persuaded him that Mary’s explanation for her pregnancy was authentic. Moreover, that Joseph needed to take her as his wife and to name the child Jesus, to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophets.

I wonder, though, how many families represented here would like to undergo the birth of a child under the conditions that Joseph and Mary endured.

At the risk of disturbing our understanding I want to clarify a few details of the story. I think this will lead us to some lessons we will want to keep in mind this season and beyond.

On account of the census that was ordered by Caesar Augustus, Joseph and Mary knew they must travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem around the time her child might be born. It was a distance of 80 miles, to be accomplished by walking or riding on a donkey. For them it probably took three exhausting days. Those of you who have carried a pregnancy can imagine what that journey might have been like for Mary. Imagine someone carrying a nearly full term pregnancy bouncing along on a farm animal or walking twenty-five miles per day for three days in challenging weather/ warm or hot days, cool or cold nights and unpredictable wind sometimes blowing sand. Mary’s age provided a health

advantage as she was probably in her mid to late teens. Joseph was likely older. We can guess that he might have been in his twenties or possibly in his thirties.

Some might say it was unfair for Mary to be forced to make such a journey so late in her pregnancy. But think of the alternative. She would have wanted to be close to Joseph. It is likely that some of Nazareth's residents might have talked unfavorably about her pregnancy. She was not yet supposed to be with child. Though the trip must have been exhausting no doubt Mary preferred it rather than to remain back in Nazareth without him.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, worn out from the journey, our twenty first century minds assume they went to the nearest motel and asked for a room. But, as the Bible tells us.

. . . **“There was no room at the Inn.”**

That may not have been exactly the way the story took place. Those of you who are familiar, remember the story of the birth of Elizabeth as recorded in the first chapter of Luke. We learn that Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. Remember that Elizabeth is beyond child-bearing years. When Mary learns from the angel that Elizabeth is six month's along in her pregnancy, she goes to visit. Zechariah and Elizabeth live in the hill country which is near Bethlehem.

We can imagine the two of them doing a bit of advance planning. It is likely that Mary stayed with Elizabeth until John was born. If they knew that the census would bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem would they not have arranged where the couple would stay and where the birth would take place? Remember, too, that Joseph came from the family line of David and likely had relatives in Bethlehem. To me, the most unlikely part of the story is that Joseph and Mary would arrive in Bethlehem, about to deliver and not have arranged for their lodging. Who among us would do that?

Yet that is what we so often imagine because the text in Luke (2:6) says:

**“While they were there the time came for the baby to be born, and Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.”**

Years ago I heard various sermons about the innkeeper who found this young couple at his door that evening looking for a place to give birth. Depending on the perspective of the preacher, the innkeeper was either condemned for not making a room available, even his own, or praised for creatively finding space, a cave or a barn out back somewhere for them.

Joseph is a target for criticism because he is the dad on the scene. He is the adult present who is not nine month's pregnant. Why did he not make prior arrangements? What pregnant couple would not plan carefully the details of the birth to assure a healthy delivery? Was Joseph an inept dad?

This story has another side. I have been listening to three scholars: Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian who lived and taught in the Middle East for thirty years, Dr. Fred Craddock, formerly a New Testament and preaching professor at Emory University and Dr. Jim Edwards, currently New Testament professor at Whitworth University. They believe that we should look at a translation issue. They believe that the Greek word “kataluma” which has been translated “Inn” can have more than one meaning. It also means “guestroom.” They believe Luke, our storyteller, intends us to understand that Joseph and Mary arrived at the home in Bethlehem of friends or relatives who were expecting them.

Because of the huge influx of people in that city trying to register for the census, another visiting family arrived at the home first and occupied the guestroom. Many Middle Eastern houses in those days had one floor for the use of the family and another, sometimes just a few feet below. That one would provide a safe haven for the livestock to come indoors to protect themselves from the winter weather but prevent them from having the run of the house. Since indoor space was at a premium, it is likely that Joseph and Mary settled in an area with the livestock, still inside the house, and still with their relatives who would assist the birth. That would explain why the baby was placed in a manger, which is another name for a feeding trough.

The idea that Jesus was homeless at birth, born out under the night sky or in a barn or a cave with no human assistance makes a compelling story, especially as we reflect on the plight of homeless people today. But the evidence does not support it. At his birth I believe Mary and Joseph stayed at the home of relatives sleeping indoors with the livestock, just beyond the living room because **“there was no room in the guestroom”** as other travelers claimed it ahead of them.

### **Here are three quick points I find in our story:**

First: Joseph was a man of great wisdom and courage. He believed the angel who visited him in his dream and chose to take Mary as his wife even though common evidence would have persuaded him to turn her out. No doubt he, too, could have heard gossip in the community about that pregnancy. His own reputation may have taken a beating. He needed to be stronger than the gossip and he was. Quietly he received the angel’s direction and obediently he carried out God’s plans. Quiet obedience describes Joseph. It’s also called righteousness, even in the face of hardships and criticism. What lesson lies there for you and me?

Second: God’s plans are perfect and God gets all the details right. Joseph was a righteous dad, who cared enough for his new family to see that the birth would be in a safe setting, not at the mercy of an innkeeper he did not know, but in the home of relatives. If you would prefer to believe the better known story, feel free. But remember that it rests on the mis-translation of one word in Luke 2: 6.

Third: We find another lesson that we also discovered in last week's text; God sends messengers to people. God communicates with people even today. God is interested in our lives down to the smallest details, just as God sent an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream and the course of history changed. Let's each be alert to the guidance God sends to us.

Just as God had far better plans for Joseph and Mary than they could imagine for themselves, God also has good plans for each one of us, if we will listen in and cooperate.

**Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us."**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**