

Advent 4: Salient Joseph

"When Mary was betrothed to Joseph but before they lived together she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. 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. But an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins'...When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him." (Matt. 1: 18-21, 24)

To be salient means to be as tenderly responsive to others as one is straight and true to them. A salient father tends to inspire the respect of his wife and rears kids who are well-equipped to navigate life's riptides. He combines authority with nurture in a way that secures and empowers his family in love.

Joseph is to me the ultimate expression of the salient father. We know little of him from scripture. No words of his are recorded: just extraordinary actions in response to holy dreams and an altogether salient love for his family.

Joseph's tender responsiveness is first emotional. Before any awareness of the holy child in Mary's womb, Joseph chose to guard Mary's 'dishonor', not to magnify it (as might a spurned narcissist!) Then he takes his cues from dreams and is so certain that God is speaking through them that he risks all to obey Him. He listens to the whispers and acts.

God chose a man who combined spiritual and emotional tenderness with strength. Joseph used that power to guard the life of mother and child; it was particularly evident in the family's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A dangerous trip at best, the 80 thankless miles through a route hostile to the Jews (not to mention an expectant mother atop a donkey) required extraordinary leadership: awareness of woman and child at their most vulnerable, and the might to protect them.

Following Jesus' birth, we know that Joseph followed a similar pattern of dreams and arduous obedience. He led his young family to Egypt to avoid the scourge of Herod then brought them back when commanded. We know little else about Joseph except that his 'son grew and became strong' in both grace and wisdom (LK 2: 40). Might we assume that these qualities are as much gifts from Jesus' human father as they are from His heavenly one?

Knowing little about strong silent Joseph may help us here. His salience is evident in how he acts, not in what he says. As a therapeutic man of the 21st century, I find Joseph's life refreshing and challenging. I am a man of many words who can describe nuances of the soul while hiding in those crevices. I can easily confuse introspection with Holy Spirit promptings, self-care with abject selfishness, knowing about listening with actual listening.

All too often, my ideas about self-giving do not inspire such giving but rather expose the truth of how I withhold from those I love most.

May salient Joseph rouse and inspire us to hear more keenly and love more powerfully.