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16 Scott Powell St Joseph, Protector and Father

Hey everybody, its Scott Powell. Welcome back to the Pray More Lenten Retreat. So, did you know that Saint Joseph's feast day actually falls during Lent? It's actually interesting because we usually, we often only think about Saint Joseph in regards to Christmas, with the story of the birth of Jesus. And quite frankly, because we don't really hear about Joseph that much other than that part of the Gospel because he's pretty quiet and he doesn't show up a lot, which I think is kind of befitting to Joseph's character and his humility. So I want to talk a little bit today about some of the things we do know about Joseph and maybe what we can learn from that. So, before we jump in, let's open in a prayer.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Jesus, thank you for the gift of this Lenten Retreat. Thank you so much for all of the retreatants and the organizers and the speakers. And we pray that you would bless us as we journey through this holy season. Please open our minds and ears, our hearts and our eyes to what you have to teach us. And I pray that you not let me say anything that's outside of your will. And we pray all these things through Christ our Lord. Amen, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.*

Okay. So, Saint Joseph, again, we first get the information we have on Saint Joseph from the Christmas story. And we really meet him when Mary is told by the angel that she's going to have this baby named Jesus, and he's going to do all these crazy things and he's going to save people from their sins. And Joseph, if you remember the story, gets wind that Mary is pregnant, and, justifiably so, starts freaking out. Did you know that there are actually three annunciations in the Bible?

The first time, the angel Gabriel goes and appears to a priest named Zechariah in the temple to tell him that he's going to have a child named John the Baptist who is going to be the forerunner to the Messiah. Then he appears, the angel Gabriel, that is, to Mary, and he tells Mary that

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she's going to give birth to the Messiah. And then, to do some damage control, Gabriel appears to Joseph, to say, "it's okay, you don't have to be terrified, even though you've been thrust into an utterly terrifying situation."

Joseph hears that the woman he's betrothed to, which means they're actually legally married but they have not come together and consummated the marriage yet. That's what betrothal is in the ancient Jewish worldview. He knows that this is where things stand and he hears that she is now going to give birth. There are a couple different scenarios and there are different theories on how Joseph responds.

He responds in the Gospel by wanting to divorce her quietly. And that's the first thing to tell you that they're actually legally married by this point. It's not just an engagement. There's actually something legal that's happened, but they've not consummated the marriage, which everybody knows, everybody's aware of where the marriage stands. So as soon as people find out about what state Mary is in, everybody's going to know that either Joseph and Mary did something they shouldn't have, or Mary has been unfaithful. Neither of these things looks good for either of them. And the punishment for that in the culture and in the Old Testament is stoning. So the stakes are really high.

So some people suggest that Joseph wanted to divorce Mary quietly because he thought this was a terrible thing she did but he was merciful enough that he didn't want her to get stoned, so he just wanted to kind of quietly extricate himself from the situation. I don't really buy that. And there's another theory out there that suggests that Joseph actually really does know what's going on. He understands that there's something bigger than this going on. This is not just infidelity. God has used Mary in some profound way.

This theory suggests that Joseph knew Mary well enough to know that she never could have done this thing that people are going to think she did. And it's called the reverential view, that Joseph realizes, "Oh my

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gosh, this is too much. The Holy Spirit, God has stepped in, and He's done something divine here. And if that's true, it's too much for me. I'm too small, I'm too weak. I am not worthy to be with this woman that God has chosen to do this singular act with and to and for. I've gotta get out because not that Mary is in the wrong but that I'm too small, I'm not enough for this."

And I believe that's why Gabriel goes to Joseph and says, "Joseph." Because look at the words that Gabriel uses in Matthew. He says, "Don't be afraid to take Mary into your home. It's okay". In other words, you're going to be given the grace to do this thing. Which I think is a bigger deal than we maybe give it credit for because, again, I think we sometimes think of the birth story of Jesus, we think both of Mary and Joseph, and we think of this awkward situation that they're going to be in, and people are going to talk behind their back and kind of whisper, and there's going to be this embarrassment. But this is not a scenario of embarrassment or whispers behind their back. If what people are going to think about Mary was true, then she's going to be stoned. And if Joseph is partially responsible for it, then he's going to be stoned to. Or he's going to be shamed and he's going to bring utter dishonor to his family and everyone around him.

The stakes are ridiculously high, so when Gabriel goes to Joseph and says, "Don't be afraid to take Mary into your home"; that's a real fear that Joseph is dealing with. That's a fear of, "I don't know how to get out of this. I don't know how to protect Mary". And essentially that's what Joseph does, and that's the role that he then takes on. He becomes, and this is one of the things that Joseph is patron of, he's the protector of families, because he was the first protector of the Holy Family.

Now we fast forward a little bit now. We know kind of the rest of the story. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. She stays with them for three months. She comes back. At some point, her and Joseph complete the marriage. They do step two of the legal marriage process because they come together and they live together. And then the birth comes around.

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And around the time of the birth, we know that Caesar calls for a massive empire-wide census to take place where everyone has to go to their ancestral hometown and be registered.

Now I'm not 100% sure on this, but I don't think there was any legal reason that Mary had to go to Bethlehem with Joseph. Joseph was the patriarch of the family. He was the one who was legally responsible for registering. And oftentimes women were not, for better or for worse, really, for worse, women were not included in that sort of registration process. So Joseph needed to go. And you might ask, why on earth would you drag your nine-month pregnant wife on a donkey across the desert under really hard circumstances to a place that she really doesn't really need to go? And I've wondered about that. And you can make the argument that, well, Joseph just didn't want to miss it. He didn't want to not be there for the birth 'cause it was so important to him.

But I assume and I would bet that maybe Mary had a midwife, maybe she had some friends, and maybe even Elizabeth would have come down and been with her during that birth. She would have had some resources. So why does Joseph drag her across the country to do this? And I've become more and more convinced that Joseph brings Mary and Jesus in her womb down to Bethlehem, even though they didn't all have to go, legally speaking, because he could not let them out of his sight.

And he knew that if he turned his back, he knew the reputation that was at stake, he knew how people probably thought about Mary, he knew that people were not convinced that there was some divine intervention and that's how she got pregnant. There was probably always a shadow over this family. There was probably always a shame and a dishonor. There were probably those whispers all over the place of these people, and this Joseph who was this doormat who let himself be cheated on, or maybe he was unfaithful, but either way these people are fairly distasteful. And I bet Joseph wasn't sure what was going to happen, or maybe he was sure what would happen if he turned his back, so he said,

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"I will not let you out of my sight. I will not let you, my beloved, or the child in your womb out of my sight, so we're all going to Bethlehem".

Because that's how much Joseph knew he had to protect, he had to care, and he had to safeguard. And so they go to Bethlehem. And this is where the story gets weird, and this is where everything that we've heard of the birth story of Jesus, we need to kind of reconsider a little bit, because I don't think the story is as simple as we've given it credit for. And, in a certain sense, the story is a little bit more Lenten than we've given it credit for. It doesn't quite fit into a nice Christmas hymn you hear on the radio, or Christmas song.

But they go to Bethlehem, which is Joseph's ancestral homeland. It's his hometown, and that's of course the hometown of David, his great-great-great-great-great-whatever grandfather. Because Joseph knows, I bet Joseph knows, Matthew knows, the scriptures know, they make it clear to us that Joseph is descendant to the throne of David. He is the heir of the king. He is the royal family.

Now Israel at that time is controlled by Caesar and Caesar's empire, and Caesar has chosen to put a guy named Pilate as the king, so to speak, over the region. But Pilate wasn't a Jew; he wasn't of the line of David. He was a sham king, and everybody knew it, and everyone disrespected him. But if you knew that you were the heir of the true throne of the real kingship, you might not want to tell everybody because you could lose your life pretty quick, because I bet Pilate was pretty threatened by it. Oh, I'm sorry, Herod, I said Pilate. Herod was incredibly threatened, and he was threatened by the birth of Jesus. This is why he was so threatened by the birth of Jesus. He killed all of the innocent children because he was so desperate that no one take away his throne.

But I bet Joseph knew. I bet he knew exactly who he was. And I bet members of Joseph's family knew. So Joseph comes to town with his nine-month pregnant wife. And we read in the story and some of our translations say there was no room at the inn. As if there was a Best

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Western or a Holiday Inn or something that there was just no vacancy. The word for inn, the Greek word for inn doesn't appear in the story. The word inn does appear later on in the gospels when the good Samaritan puts the guy up who was beaten on the side of the road in an inn. But where Joseph goes and where the Holy Family is excluded from is not a commercial inn, is not a hotel. It says there was no room for them in the place, which is kind of generic. But what does that mean?

I mean, imagine you go back to your hometown, the place where your family is from. Or flip it on its head, maybe. Imagine some family come to visit you. Easter's coming up, right? Some family come for Easter. And maybe there's a lot of family in town and maybe you have a big family and a lot of people are coming from a lot of places. And your uncle, your nephew, your cousin, whatever, a family member shows up with his nine-month pregnant wife and says, "Hey, can we crash with you guys?" Can you imagine, it's hard for me to imagine any family, or imagine myself or my family or anyone I know that would say, "We don't have any room, man." Can we have a spot on the couch? Is there a corner of the floor in the living room where we can just sleep? And to actually have your family members say, "I'm sorry, no. There's not a corner of the couch, there's not a square of carpet anywhere that you and your nine-month pregnant wife can stay on".

Can you imagine that scenario? I mean, if your family shows up from anywhere, you're going to find them some place to sleep, right? But that doesn't happen with the Holy Family. Not to mention the fact that I bet everybody knew who Joseph was. His family knew that he was descendant to the king. So not only are you not willing to put your family member up for a couple nights, but this is your family member who's the true heir to the throne of David. You're not willing to put him up. And then add the third piece to it. His wife is nine months pregnant. I mean, this is an honor culture in which it would be dishonorable to throw a nine-month pregnant woman out on the streets. But that's basically what's happening here, which if you put it into circumstances

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of your own life or anyone you know, this all of a sudden sounds almost absurd.

And someone apparently relents and they say basically they equivalent of, "No, we don't have a corner of the living room or a couch or anything for you guys, but maybe you can go in the stable in the backyard." – Which is basically telling your uncle and his nine-month pregnant wife, "We don't have any room but maybe you can sleep in the garage. We can move the Honda over and maybe you guys can sleep there, and maybe she can give birth in the garage." -Which to me really adds a different feel to this story. This is not like, oh, there's no vacancy in the hotels because it's super busy, and so we're going to go to this barn stable. It's the family members saying, "We will help you, but just barely. We will do the absolute minimum ".

Why? Well, I think it can't be ignored that the Holy Family probably has a bad reputation. That I bet people know that, well, she got pregnant before they'd come together, and you know what happened with Joseph and that Mary girl. And there is this shadow that hangs over them. And so the birth of Jesus, the birth of Jesus is not simply one of simplicity. It's not simply one of humility. That's how we always sort of think of the story of Jesus' birth. It is one of dishonor and shame.

But if that's true, then that means that we have a God who took upon himself all of the dishonor and the shame that his family, that his mom and dad were going to endure, he took it upon himself and he said, "Yeah, I will be born into dishonor. I will be born into shame in the ancient equivalent of the garage, where we keep the animals ". Yeah, maybe you can give birth out there. That's the circumstances, and that's what Joseph, this is where I keep coming, as a father, as a husband, I keep coming back to Joseph because it's Joseph who endures it.

It's Joseph who absorbs it. It's Joseph whose family won't even take him in. Can you imagine the pain of having your family not take you and your pregnant wife in? And having to endure that without crumbling,

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without falling apart, while still saying, “ Okay, I'll figure this out , I'm still the protector, I will still safeguard. Even though everyone around me thinks I'm something else, even though everyone around me thinks I'm something of shame and embarrassment, something that they've humiliated of, that they will just barely give a scrap of dignity to. And I'll absorb it, and I will take it, and I will bring this family under my arms and my wings and my protection, and I will raise this child who is the Savior of the world”.

And for the Savior of the world to enter into that, into the shame, into the uncomfortableness, into the embarrassment, into the humiliation of being born an outcast, - that's powerful to me. And that makes the Christmas story not, you know, happy-go-lucky Christmas carol story. It becomes very penitential, very suffering, and very Lenten.

And so long before Lent is ever a thing, Saint Joseph lives his Lent. And of course Mary too. And Jesus himself is born into it. But I wonder about how Joseph takes that on in his understanding of himself as protector, as safeguard, as father, as head of the family.

He has to absorb that in a very particular way. And so I think it's appropriate that we reflect a little bit on Joseph's role in that story during Lent as Joseph carries across. Before Jesus, his son, will ever take up that cross, years later, Joseph already carries it. Jesus gives him the grace. He prepares him, he allows him the grace of entering into the passion in some small way before the passion ever takes place. And that's why Joseph is so significant.

And again, in the gospels, he doesn't say a word. Joseph does not have one word ascribed to him in the entirety of the gospels. He says nothing. Which, thinking about the story in this way, it sort of makes that more appropriate. He opened not his mouth, right? To put it in the words of the Old Testament: He took it, he absorbed it. Which makes me wonder what are the things in my life that I'm unwilling to absorb? What are the hurts or the slander or the insults or the persecution that I just want to

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fight back? And human beings often when we're slated, we want to fight, we want to attack, we want to slander right back.

But Joseph doesn't. He endures, he takes, he absorbs. And that is the scenario that God chooses to be born in. That's the father that he chooses to raise him in this earthly life. And I think we can take a lot from that. Again, Joseph doesn't say anything in the gospels. I'm sure he speaks, but the Holy Spirit, in the wisdom of God from the ages, has chosen to not give us any of his words.

So we have to guess, we have to speculate, because Joseph, if nothing else, Joseph's whole task is saying, "No, it's not about me, it's about them. It's about the Holy Family. It's about Mary and it's about the child that she carries. So, yes, I will not leave them alone, I will not go and be the hero and do the census myself. I will take them so that I can hold them up, so that I can wrap them in my arms, so that I can protect ". There's a lot there for me.

And I don't know exactly the words to leave you with except that, as I go through Lent this year, I think I'm going to ask that Saint Joseph accompany me because I'm a little afraid and I don't quite know the way, and I need a father like Saint Joseph to guide me and protect me and to wrap me in his arms. So this Lent, as we get close to celebrating this feast day, let's remember Saint Joseph and the passion that he endured at Christmas time.

Thanks everybody.