

ISAIAH 7:10-16 & MATTHEW 1:18-25

A SONG BY WILLIAM GAITHER OPENS WITH: “JESUS, JESUS, JESUS, THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THAT NAME.”

IN THE BIBLE WE HEAR GABRIEL’S WORDS: “YOU ARE TO NAME HIM JESUS”. BOTH MARY AND JOSEPH RECEIVED THE SAME COMMAND CONCERNING HER CHILD.

BUT JESUS- WAS A FAIRLY COMMON NAME AT THE TIME, DERIVED FROM JOSHUA. IT MEANS: “GOD SAVES” OR “THE LORD IS SALVATION.”

THUS JESUS’ OWN NAME SPELLS OUT THE PURPOSE OF HIS INCARNATION AND LIFE. AND THE NAME JESUS, COUPLED WITH THE TITLE EMMANUEL, SPEAKS EVEN MORE INTENTLY TO THE FACT JESUS IS GOD WITH US. HE IS GOD, OUR SAVIOR, WHO CAME TO EARTH AS ONE OF US.

BOTH THE LONGER NATIVITY STORY FROM LUKE, AND THE COMPACT VERSION FOUND IN MATTHEW PRESENT THE KEY FACT OF JESUS AS BEING BOTH GOD AND A MAN.

JOSEPH IS FURTHER TOLD HIS BIRTH FULFILLS COMPLETELY THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH, WE HEARD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT READING.

THE VERSES FROM ISAIAH CHAPTER SEVEN WERE GIVEN IN THE 8TH CENTURY B.C. THEY CONTAIN GOD’S CALL TO KING AHAZ OF JUDAH TO RETURN TO FAITH IN HIM.

HOWEVER, THE KING WAS NOT INTERESTED IN GOD’S HELP WITH HIS ENEMIES, HE TURNED HIS BACK ON THE LORD.

BUT GOD RESPONDED TO THE KING IN A SURPRISING WAY-BY HAVING ISAIAH PROCLAIM THAT A SON WOULD BE BORN TO A YOUNG WOMAN.

AND THIS ROYAL CHILD WOULD HAVE GOD’S PRESENCE WITH HIM, AND WOULD BE HIS REPRESENTATIVE. THE ORIGINAL PROMISE WAS FULFILLED WHEN A SON WAS LATER BORN TO AHAZ.

HE WAS CALLED HEZEKIAH AND IS KNOWN AS ONE OF THE MOST PIOUS AND RIGHTEOUS KINGS OF JUDAH.

IN CONTRAST TO THE LACK OF FAITH AND TRUST IN GOD SHOWN BY KING AHAZ, EIGHT CENTURIES LATER A HUMBLE MAN WOULD DEMONSTRATE EXTREME TRUST IN THE LORD.

FOR WHILE THE KING HAD NOT BEEN OPEN TO GOD’S LEADING, JOSEPH OF NAZARETH WAS.

HE, UNLIKE AHAZ, LISTENED TO AND BELIEVED GOD’S WORD CONCERNING THE NEW AND GREATER FULFILLMENT OF ISAIAH 7:14

POOR JOSEPH, IMAGINE HIS STRESS WHEN HE HEARD MARY WAS GOING TO HAVE A BABY AND HE KNEW HE WAS NOT THE FATHER.

AS A RIGHTEOUS MAN, HE SHOULD RESPOND BY NOT TAKING MARY INTO HIS HOUSEHOLD. BUT ENDING THINGS BETWEEN THE TWO THEM WAS COMPLICATED.

IT WASN’T LIKE HE COULD SIMPLY BREAK THINGS OFF BY ASKING FOR HIS RING BACK. A BETROTHAL WAS A LEGAL CONTRACT UNDER JEWISH LAW, AND OTHER THAN DEATH, IT HAD TO BE BROKEN LEGALLY.

IN ESSENCE MARY WAS LEGALLY AND SOCIALLY CONSIDERED JOSEPH’S WIFE EVEN THOUGH SHE STILL LIVED IN HER PARENT’S HOUSE.

THE QUESTION WAS-SHOULD HE MAKE AN ISSUE OF HER UNFAITHFULNESS OR DIVORCE HER QUIETLY? JOSEPH WHO WAS COMPASSIONATE, AS WELL AS RIGHTEOUS, DECIDED TO DO THE LATTER.

ONCE HAVING MADE UP HIS MIND HOW HE WOULD HANDLE THE SITUATION, HE WENT TO SLEEP, SEEMLY AT PEACE WITH HIS CHOICE.

AND THEN HE HEARD THE WORDS, THAT ANY AVID READER OF SCRIPTURE KNOWS IS CAUSE FOR FEAR, BECAUSE IT MEANS GOD IS ABOUT TO TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE.

THOSE WORDS ARE: “DO NOT BE AFRAID.” YES INDEED JOSEPH WAS CALLED TO FAITH, AND NOT FEAR. HIS OBEDIENCE WAS IMPORTANT, IT CHANGED EVERYTHING FOR THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE NATIVITY STORY.

JOSEPH WOULD BE THE PROTECTOR AND PROVIDER FOR MARY AND HER CHILD. AND IT IS BY HIS WORD MARY’S CHILD, WHOM HE CLAIMED AS HIS OWN BY MARRING HER, WOULD BE NAMED JESUS.

SO JOSEPH’S ROLE IS VITAL TO THE POSITIVE OUTCOME OF THE STORY, AND YET POOR JOSEPH IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

HE IS LIKE A BIT PLAYER IN A MOVIE. IN FACT, WE NEVER EVEN HEAR HIS VOICE. INSTEAD HIS REMAINS IN THE BACKGROUND, NECESSARY, BUT PERIPHERAL COMPARED TO THE MAIN CHARACTERS.

PRESBYTERIAN POET ANN WEEMS CAPTURES THIS IDEA IN A POEM SHE WROTE ABOUT JOSEPH, WHICH OPENS WITH A QUESTION. SHE ASKS US ALL: “WHO PUT JOSEPH IN THE BACK OF THE STABLE?”

SO, THEN LET US THINK A LITTLE MORE ABOUT JOSEPH, WHO IS OFTEN THE FORGOTTEN CHARACTER IN THE NATIVITY STORY. LIKE HIS NAME SAKE, JOSEPH IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS, GOD SPOKE TO JOSEPH OF NAZARETH IN HIS DREAMS.

HEARING GOD IN OUR DREAMS IS COMPLICATED. IT REQUIRES A DIFFERENT KIND OF OPENNESS TO GOD’S WORD THAN A MORE DIRECT COMMUNICATION.

GOD OFTEN SPOKE TO PEOPLE IN THEIR DREAMS, AND SURELY DOES SO AT TIMES EVEN TODAY, EXCEPT WE ARE LESS LIKELY TO LISTEN.

JOSEPH, HOWEVER DID LISTEN. AND NOTICE HE DID NOT WAKE UP AND THINK ABOUT THE DREAM, WONDER IF IT WAS REAL, OR WISHFUL THINKING.

INSTEAD HE ACTED RIGHT AWAY BY OBEYING GOD’S MESSAGE AND MARRYING MARY, PLACING HER IMMEDIATELY UNDER HIS PROTECTION AND CARE.

THUS HE DEMONSTRATED BY HIS ACTION, NOT ONLY OBEDIENCE TO GOD, BUT ALSO LOVE. JOSEPH, IT COULD BE SAID, MADE ROOM IN HIS HEART NOT ONLY FOR GOD, BUT FOR MARY AND FOR HER CHILD.

AFTER MARY, JOSEPH WAS THE FIRST TO WELCOME JESUS INTO THE WORLD AND INTO HIS OWN LIFE AND FAMILY. TRULY, WHILE JESUS WAS NOT HIS FLESH AND BLOOD, HE STILL WAS GIVEN TO HIM BY GOD.

JOSEPH, WAS CALLED, JUST LIKE MARY, TO PLAY HIS OWN UNIQUE ROLE IN GOD’S PLAN OF SALVATION. HE HAD TO TRUST IN GOD, AND NOT BE AFRAID TO DO MUCH MORE THAN TAKE MARY AS HIS WIFE, AND JESUS AS HIS SON.

JOSEPH WOULD HAVE TO ALLOW FAITH TO OVERCOME FEAR AGAIN, WHEN GOD TOLD HIM IN A DREAM TO FLEE WITH THEM TO EGYPT.

LATER IT TOOK TO FAITH TO TRUST THAT HE NO LONGER HAD TO BE AFRAID TO BRING THEM BACK HOME TO NAZARETH. HIS INTEGRITY AND FAITH IN GOD ARE EXAMPLES FOR US, AS WELL AS HIS LOVE.

AS SOMEONE ELSE WROTE ABOUT HIM: “JOSEPH STANDS AS AN OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE TO EVERY BELIEVER AS HE EXERCISES EXTRAORDINARY FAITH IN SUBMITTING TO GOD’S PLAN.”

AND AS HIS FATHER, JOSEPH HELPED TO SHAPE JESUS’ CHARACTER, TO HELP HIM BECOME THE MAN HE WOULD BE. YES, JESUS HAD THE DIVINE PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT AND WAS SHAPED BY HIS DIVINITY. BUT JESUS WAS ALSO HUMAN.

JOSEPH, PERHAPS EVEN MORE THAN MARY, WOULD HAVE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN TEACHING JESUS HOW TO LIVE AS A MAN OF GOD IN THE CULTURE OF THAT TIME.

SO EVEN THOUGH WE USUALLY PLACE HIM IN THE BACK OF THE MANGER, JOSEPH WAS AN IMPORTANT FIGURE IN THE CHILDHOOD AND EARLY ADULTHOOD OF JESUS.

AND THIS WAS MADE POSSIBLE BECAUSE JOSEPH WAS OPEN TO GOD'S CALL, WILLING TO LET GOD CHANGE HIS PLANS AND HIS LIFE.

IN THIS WAY, ALONG WITH MARY, JOSEPH IS A MODEL FOR CHRISTIANS IN FAITH AND OBEDIENCE, AS WELL AS COURAGE.

HE, IN PARTICULAR, EMBODIES SOMEONE WITH STRONG CONVICTIONS AND GREAT COMPASSION. HE WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN, BUT NOT SELF-RIGHTEOUS.

JOSEPH WAS OPEN TO GOD'S LEADING, DEMONSTRATING THAT BEING FAITHFUL TO GOD SOMETIMES MEANS WE WILL BE AT ODDS WITH WHAT SOCIETY THINKS WE SHOULD DO.

FROM ALL THESE CHARACTERISTICS OF JOSEPH, AND FROM HIS ROLE IN JESUS' LIFE ON EARTH, THERE IS SOMETHING IMPORTANT WE CAN LEARN.

WE ARE SHOWN IN THIS STORY THAT GOD DOESN'T ONLY CALL US INTO THE SPOTLIGHT .IN FACT, MORE OFTEN THAT NOT WE ARE CALLED TO THE SIDELINES, TO BE BIT PLAYERS IN THE LARGER PICTURE.BUT LET US NOT THINK A SMALL AND SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT PART IN THE STORY IS NOT OF GREAT VALUE.

JOSEPH NEVER SPEAKS IN THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE, YET HIS **ACTIONS** SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS. HE LITERALLY HAD THE SUPPORTING ROLE IN THE LIVES OF MARY AND OF JESUS. AND WITHOUT JOSEPH'S SUPPORT THINGS WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT FOR THEM.

GOD, OF COURSE COULD HAVE WORKED SOMETHING OUT, IF JOSEPH HAD REFUSED HIS CALL, BUT IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ACCORDING TO THE ORIGINAL PLAN.

AND JOSEPH, HIMSELF, WOULD HAVE MISSED OUT BEING A PART OF GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION. NO MATTER WHAT ELSE HE MIGHT HAVE DONE IN LIFE, NOTHING COULD EVER HAVE BEEN AS IMPORTANT AND WORLD-CHANGING AS BEING THE EARTHLY FATHER OF JESUS.

MAY JOSEPH'S RIGHTEOUSNESS, COMPASSION, FAITH, AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD BE AN INSPIRATION TO US.

MAY HIS NEARLY FORGOTTEN ROLE IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST REMIND US THAT EVEN SMALL OR FORGOTTEN DEEDS IN THE NAME OF JESUS ARE KNOWN BY GOD.

FURTHERMORE SUCH DEEDS MAY, UNBEKNOWNST TO US, BE OF IMMEASURABLE VALUE TO THE WORLD.

SO LET US THANK THE LORD FOR JOSEPH AND HIS EXAMPLE. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY LET US BE THANKFUL FOR OUR SAVIOR JESUS, EMMANUEL, GOD WITH US. AMEN