



Joseph: The Patron Saint of the Irrelevant

By Rev. Jeffrey W. Frymire

A Sermon Resource From The Nativity Story

Perhaps no story is better known than that of the Nativity. It seems that everyone has a major part to play in the story. But is there one who is irrelevant? Could it be Joseph?

Read Luke 2:1-7

Opening Illustration: As members of the First Baptist Church in Kingston, Oklahoma, arrived at church, they noticed a very shabbily dressed, bearded man wandering near the front of the church, poking in garbage cans. His pants were worn, his cap was dirty, his coat torn and his shoes in a shambles. Some members of the church commented about “that old bum” out there, but few, if any, approached him. The ushers eyed him with suspicion and concern. All was forgotten until the end of the special music. As the choir finished its anthem, the old bum came walking down the aisle. The murmuring in the congregation was audible. It reached its crescendo when the old man had the audacity to go all the way to the front to find a seat. It was then that the “old bum” turned and faced the congregation. Taking off his hat, wig, and fake beard, the “old bum” was transformed into the Senior Pastor, Rev. Bobby Rice, Jr. Rev. Rice then preached on the “Sin of Unconcern.” During his message he related that only two of the thousands of parishioners that day had even bothered to speak to him. One had offered him a meal; the other, a new member who was to be baptized that day, invited him to come to church. All in all, the “old bum” went unnoticed by the worshippers; irrelevant to their pursuit of life, God, and the Bible.

Transition: There are those in our society that we do not see; that we do not hear; that we do not notice. Even greater among us are those who feel unnoticed, unheard, unloved, and unknown. Some of these become violent (you can use the illustration of Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris – the shooters at Columbine as an example); others simply fade into the background of society and live “quiet lives of desperation”.



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Illustration: During the National Football League Draft, the final draft pick is conferred with the dubious title, “Mr. Irrelevant,” because his chances of making the team are very remote. In the Christmas Story, who is Mr. Irrelevant?

Scriptural Background: In the Christmas Story, who is the one character that is unnecessary for Christmas?

- Jesus? Surely not, for he is the “reason for the season” and the central character of the story.
- Mary? Hardly, for she is the chosen vessel through whom the Holy Spirit delivers the long awaited Messiah.
- Angels? Can an angelic visitation ever be considered an irrelevant event? When the messengers of Heaven speak, the world notices.
- Shepherds? Well, maybe they were the lowest social group at the birth but they were surely not irrelevant to the story. After all, without them, the angelic pronouncements fall on deaf ears. It is up to the shepherds to speak meaning into this common birth.
- Wise Men? These brilliant scholars and leaders come with a message of interpretation; a sign that this Messiah comes not only to the Jews but to the world of the Gentiles, as well. That is a revolutionary theological idea and hardly an irrelevant piece of the Nativity puzzle.
- Who then? Who is irrelevant? Could it be Joseph? What was his function in this unfolding story? He was not there for conception; nearly divorced and shamed his betrothed; is not around for Jesus’ adulthood; and, as far as we know, his only contribution is that he is of David’s house and so they have to go to Bethlehem for the birth (although Mary has the same lineage).

1) The Relevance of Joseph

- a) Joseph is the patron saint of the unloved and the irrelevant. His place at the birth is, at best, insignificant.
 - i) How often have you felt such feelings? At the job, in relationships, at school, in the church – we all are searching for meaning in life. But how often do we end up feeling like a pair of brown shoes at a formal occasion?



- ii) The reality of Joseph is that we know little, if anything, about him:
 - (1) Genealogy (Luke 3:23)
 - (2) Amazement (Luke 4:22)
 - (3) He was poor (Luke 2:24 – the standard offering for poor people)
 - (4) He was a laborer (Jesus is called “the Carpenter’s son”)
- iii) Compared to Mary and Jesus, Joseph is the most unheralded character in the story. Even Herod gets a greater part than does Joseph. He is truly the “patron saint of the unloved and the irrelevant.”
- b) Joseph, however, is included in the story. No one who is included in the story of the Nativity is really irrelevant!
 - i) In God’s economy, everyone is valuable, important, included.
 - ii) Surely it is from Joseph that Jesus learns this important lesson about the human condition. Everyone needs to be needed. Everyone needs to know her or his value.
 - (1) Jesus speaks to this when he says during his ministry after he speaks about the fact that God even notices the death of a sparrow, *“Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Luke 12:7)*
 - iii) Even the humble circumstances of the Nativity Story shout loudly that God sees, hears, knows and values the unnoticed. And if God notices those who go unnoticed by others, shouldn’t we, as his body – as his eyes – see those whom others do not see (or want to see)?

Illustration: Dr. Sam Hines pastored the Third St. Church of God in Washington, D.C. for many years and helped to create a place called “Reconciliation Square” where those who were unvalued by others could find a place of hope and meaning. On one occasion, as the church prepared to feed the homeless, one of the church members introduced Dr. Hines to a pain-filled, aching 80-year-old man. As the man shared his story, Dr. Hines found out that he had just gotten out of prison the day before. He was sentenced to prison when he was a young man of only 24. Now, after 56 years in prison, he had faced his first night away from the walls that had been his home. He had spent the night in the park, having no family or place to go. During the night he was beaten and robbed of the \$35 that the prison had issued him. Certainly, in that situation, he felt very much like he was “Mr. Irrelevant”. What would you



do to change the perception? Pastor Hines knew what he should do. He gathered everyone, both servers and the homeless around him. Then he introduced his new friend to everyone. He was made that day the “Guest of Honor”. He got to sit at the head table with Dr. Hines and some other local dignitaries. He went through the line first and was invited to get a second helping even before he had consumed his first. He was addressed by all as “Mr.” rather than, “Hey you”. At the end of the meal he stood up and told the crowd, “Last night I thought the world was a wilderness and I wanted to go back to prison. Now I see it’s a garden and I want to smell the roses”.

2) The Legacy of Joseph

- a) Joseph was not irrelevant; he was of royal blood (Luke 2:4). With the blood of King David coursing through his veins, he became, instead, a commoner – a carpenter. There is nothing wrong with being a carpenter; it is a noble profession. But if you are born to be a King, living as a carpenter is living below your privilege.
- b) Like Joseph, too many of us as believers in Christ are living life below the privilege we have as Christians. We come to church and are:
 - i) Content to be anonymous and unnoticed
 - ii) We live our lives without victory or joy
 - iii) We do not anticipate the miracle of Christ’s presence in either our worship services or in our lives
 - iv) We rarely have the courage of our convictions to share the story of the Nativity (the “real” story) with others
- c) We were born to be royalty; we were conceived in greatness; we were made for “greater” things.
 - i) The greatest meaning of the Nativity Story is that anyone, even a common carpenter or a peasant girl or a pedestrian shepherd can be part of the greatest story every told. No one who enters into the Nativity Story can ever be irrelevant to the God of all creation!

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