

“Unlikely Saints: Joseph the Carpenter” (2014)

Matthew 1:16-2:23; Luke 1:26-2:52 ¹

Well, hello! This is quite a gathering! And the occasion that brings you here is pretty special, isn't it? I'm quite pleased to be with you on this Christmas Eve, and I'm going to tell you some things about it that you probably won't hear from anyone else. I'm able to do that because I was present at the event you celebrate. My name is Joseph—Joseph, the Carpenter, from Nazareth in Galilee.

I'm going to tell you about some pretty amazing things that God did through some pretty ordinary folks, and I guess I should begin at the beginning. My father's name was Jacob. His father was Matthan, and my great-grandfather was Eleazar. If you looked back far enough, you'd see that I'm a direct descendant of our great King David, who reigned over Israel about a thousand years before the first Christmas Eve, and of Father Abraham, who lived two thousand years before.

I was thirty-five years old when this story begins, and I was engaged to Mary, daughter of Heli, who was also descended from King David. Mary was seventeen. I know that seems like a large age difference to you, but it wasn't unusual in our day.

I'd known Mary since she was a child—her Dad was a little older than I—and hers was a good family, one of the best in Nazareth. My first wife died after we'd only been married a short time, and we had no children. Years passed, and as Mary grew to marriageable age, Heli said, “Joseph, you really should take another wife. My young Mary would be good for you!”

Well, I thought about that and prayed about that for a while, and I decided that Heli was probably right. He and I agreed on the matter according to our custom, and in so doing Mary and I became engaged. This was similar to your own engagement, except that our engagements could only be broken by death or divorce.

There's nothing too remarkable in this story so far, but get this: we'd been engaged for several months, and one evening when I visited Mary at her father's house after work, she suggested that we go for a walk. Once we were outside the village, Mary told me, “Joseph, I have the most wonderful thing to tell you! Three days ago, an angel appeared to me. It was Gabriel, who stands in the very presence of God!

“He told me that I was going to become pregnant, and that I would have a son, whom I was to name Jesus. Gabriel told me that Jesus would be called the Son of the Most High, that he would inherit the throne of King David, and that he would reign over Israel forever! When I objected that we weren't married yet, Gabriel told me that God's Holy Spirit would cause me to be pregnant, and that Jesus would actually be the Son of God!

“I told Gabriel, ‘I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants’; and Joseph, just as soon as I had said those words, I felt life stirring within me—at that very moment! And I can feel the baby even now. Can you believe it? Isn't it wonderful?!” (Luke 1:26-38).

Well, I wasn't so sure it was wonderful at all. Who in the world would believe a story like that? I loved and respected Mary, and I wanted to believe her, but someone else was obviously involved here. I knew this child was not mine, and I couldn't accept the crazy idea that the “Someone Else” involved was not another man, but God Himself.

I went home that night with a broken heart. Out of regard for Mary, her father—indeed, her whole family—I thought I should divorce her as quietly as possible so as to save my own

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on December 24, 2014.

reputation—not to mention my business. I fell asleep while I was trying to sort this all out . . . and then an angel appeared to me! The angel came to me in a dream and said, “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:20-21).

Well, now, what would you have done with that? Here’s what I did: after more wrestling with God, I decided to obey the heavenly vision, and Mary and I went ahead with our wedding plans, though it upset my family and hurt my business. We even kept the same wedding date, though that would now be after the baby was born. Mary’s dad didn’t believe either one of us, I think. I probably wouldn’t have, either.

It was almost time for the baby to be born, when Augustus, the Roman Emperor, sent out a decree that every man in the Empire—every man in the Empire!!!—had to travel to his ancestral home to be registered for a universal census. This meant that I had to go to Bethlehem, about seventy miles away, because I was descended from the line of King David, as I’ve told you, and that was his hometown.

Mary was almost due, and she needed to be with me, so we decided to make the trip together, hard as that was. The journey took several days, and required us to camp along the way, which was no fun for Mary, I can tell you! And when we finally got to Bethlehem, there were no rooms available anywhere. The innkeeper must have felt at least a little bit sorry for us, though, because he arranged for us to sleep for free in the Tower of the Flocks just outside of town.

The innkeeper also told us some very interesting things about the Tower of the Flocks before he sent us out there. We knew that the Law of Moses was very particular about the animals to be offered as sacrifices at the Temple, especially those that were to be killed as sin offerings. Those animals had to be without blemish or defect of any kind, and those sacred flocks were nourished and nurtured from birth until they were taken to the Temple to ensure that they had no wounds or scars or blemishes of any sort.

The innkeeper told us that this special Temple flock was kept just outside Bethlehem, near the stone watchtower to which he was sending us. He told us that the tower dates from the time of our ancestor Jacob, nearly 4,000 years before your time, and this tower has been known as “Migdal Eder” (“migdahl ayder”), or “The Tower of the Flocks” since that time. The innkeeper told us that the Temple flocks had been kept near Migdal Eder since King Solomon built the first Temple nearly a thousand years before we came to Bethlehem that night.

I learned later that while the Temple flocks lived outdoors all year, there was one occasion when a ewe was brought indoors, and that was when she was ready to give birth. The Temple shepherds maintained a special, ceremonially clean stable in The Tower of the Flocks where they brought those ewes for birthing. And that’s where our little boy was born. Jesus was born in the special, sacred birthing stable of The Tower of the Flocks, where all the Holy Sacrifices were born.

Well, even with all this powerful symbolism going on, I’ve seen what you call “manger scenes” these days, and I’m afraid that you’ve got a romantic and fanciful idea about how things really were. Have you ever been in a real stable? Even if you’ve been in one today, that’s nothing like what we had. The place was smelly and dark, and because Bethlehem is 2,500 feet above sea level, it was cold, too.

When we got to the Tower, Mary said in anguish, “Joseph, surely God doesn’t mean for His Son to be born in a place like this!” She was so upset! But later that night, my sweet Mary really did go into labor, and little Jesus really *was* born in a stable with a bunch of animals all around!

Now I know some of you are freaking out because there was no obstetrician on call in the stable. But not to worry: I've delivered more animals than I care to count, and I know how to do deliveries!

We wrapped Jesus up tightly in bands of soft cloth, and put him down to sleep on what hay was left in the manger. It was actually a niche carved in the stone wall of the Tower, not something made of wood. Mary had drifted off to sleep, and I was nodding a bit myself, when suddenly the blaze of torches filled the stable and we were surrounded by a bunch of excited shepherds.

The shepherds said they'd seen an angel, too—actually, they said they'd seen a sky-full of angels, all singing praises to God and announcing the birth of Messiah—the Savior for whom our people had waited for centuries. They said the angels told them that the Messiah had been born tonight in Bethlehem, and that they would find him wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger, of all places!

And those shepherds knew right where to find us, because they told us that they remembered the words of Targum Yerushalmi: **“He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days.”**² So the shepherds had come at once, and here we were. They were so excited that they must have awakened half the town.

Late the next day we were able to find a small room to rent, and eight days later, we circumcised our son and named him Jesus as the angel had instructed. You may know that “Jesus” means “the LORD saves.” When Jesus was thirty-three days old, we took him to the Temple—just five miles from Bethlehem—to be dedicated at the same time that Mary was cleansed from childbirth (Numbers 12:1-8). Some pretty unusual things happened then, too.

When we came into the outer court of the Temple, an old man named Simeon came right over to us, asked to hold Jesus, and said very loudly, *“Sovereign LORD, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”* And then he said to Mary and me, *“And a sword will pierce your very soul”* (Luke 2:29-35). An old woman named Anna came over and said the same sorts of things. We didn't know what to think!

Soon after that, Mary and I had a simple wedding ceremony in Bethlehem, and we found a small house in which to live. I opened a carpenter shop, and we were able to make ends meet. We decided not to go back to Nazareth for a while because of all the scandal about the pregnancy.

We'd been in Bethlehem about two years when another really strange thing happened. A knock came on the door one evening, and when I went outside, I saw three men who were obviously

² Migdal Eder is mentioned in Genesis 35:21 and Micah 4:8. This quote comes from the Targum Yerushalmi (also known as Targum Pseudo-Jonathan): *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel On the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee* by J. W. Etheridge, M.A. (1862): “And Rahel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jakob erected a pillar over the house of burying—which is the pillar of the tomb of Rahel unto this day. **And Jakob proceeded and spread his tent beyond the tower of Eder, the place from whence, it is to be, the King Meshiha will be revealed at the end of the days.**” <http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/> <http://targum.info/pj/pjgen32-36.htm>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targum_Pseudo-Jonathan I'm taking a bit of liberty here, since Targum Pseudo-Jonathan actually dates from at least several centuries after Jesus. See also Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah* in one volume (1886; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), part 1, pp. 185-186, especially this: **“That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder, ‘the tower of the flock’”** (p. 186); and also see Rabbi Mike L. Short, *Migdal Eder*, www.mayimhayim.org/Rabbi%20Mike/Migdal%20Eder.htm; www.kolsimcha.org/messages/2009/040909M.pdf; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_\(biblical_location\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_(biblical_location)).

wealthy standing there. They said that they'd traveled from Parthia—near ancient Babylon—following an unusual star that they were sure announced the birth of a great king of the Jews.

They said they'd been traveling for months—since not long after the star appeared—and that the star had led them to our very house! For guys who had traveled so long to find Jesus, they only stayed an hour or so, and as they left, each of them gave a gift to Him: one gave gold, the symbol of a king; one gave frankincense, the symbol of a priest; and one gave myrrh, an embalming spice that symbolized the usual “reward” of a prophet. It was all just too weird.

That night, after the strangers had gone, I had a second dream. Another angel said to me, *“Get up and flee to Egypt with the child and his mother. Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to try to kill the child”* (Matthew 2:13). The angel's message was so urgent that I awakened Mary, and we packed up what we could and left Bethlehem long before sunup that very night.

I know the townspeople wondered what in the world had become of us . . . but they found out all too soon. Within the week, King Herod sent his soldiers from Jerusalem to murder every little boy in Bethlehem and in the surrounding countryside who was two years old or less. That was because the wise men from the East had told Herod that they had first seen the star about two years before. Herod wasn't taking any chances with future competition. The angel's warning saved Jesus from that murderous rampage, but the whole affair was horrible beyond all imagining.

We went to live in Alexandria, the greatest city of the Empire after Rome itself, because I knew I could find work there. We'd lived there about a year when an angel came to me in a third dream. This time the angel said, *“Get up and take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead”* (Matthew 2:20). This was good news indeed, so we packed up at once and headed for home.

Our hearts wanted to go back to Nazareth—we'd now been gone for three years, and our parents had never even seen little Jesus—but small towns being what they are, the scandal would still be hot. Returning to Bethlehem was unthinkable. We could never bear to see our friends whose children had been murdered—because of Jesus—and they had surely understood by now why we had left so suddenly. As I struggled to know what to do and where to go to live, a fourth angel came in a dream to tell me to go ahead and return to Nazareth (Matthew 2:22-23).

How happy our families were to see us and little Jesus! And yes, tongues did wag. But I was able to find a place for us to live, and it wasn't too long before my carpenter's shop was humming once again. I did good work at a fair price, and people knew it.

It took some doing to get Jesus into synagogue school. Clear genealogy was required in order for boys to undertake such training, and our story was, well, unusual. But the Rabbi finally agreed, and Jesus did very well. He learned so quickly, in fact, that he was soon the Rabbi's favorite. Jesus understood things far beyond His years, and could explain some things that even the Rabbi couldn't explain. Mary and I knew why this was true, of course, but we didn't tell anyone.

After we settled down in Nazareth, Mary and I had six other children—seven in all, with Jesus. It was a perfect number, and it was a good life. Mary and I worshiped the Lord, loved each other, and loved our children. Jesus was a fine older brother, and a fine son. He had quite an aptitude for working with wood. He had an uncanny understanding of wood—almost like He had designed and made it Himself, if you know what I mean.

It's a good thing Jesus understood carpentry, too, because I died of a heart attack when Jesus was fifteen—I'm still alive in heaven, of course—and He had to take over both the business and the care of His mother and brothers and sisters.

Well, have you learned anything you didn't already know from this story so far? Here are the two things I want you to remember: first, **pay attention to your dreams**—they aren't all messages from God, but some of them may be; and second, **do *what God tells you to do, when God tells you to do it, whether you understand it at the time or not.***

That's the key thing about this whole story: **obedience precedes understanding.** God isn't going to give you any more understanding than you already have until you've obeyed what He's already told you to do. Wouldn't that be a great thing to settle with God on this Christmas Eve?

You are celebrating Jesus' birthday, right? What do you suppose He wants from you for His birthday? Why not ask *Him*?

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

(Christina Rossetti; "In the Bleak Midwinter")