

**“Making the Most of Our Time on Stage”**

**Matthew 1:18:25**

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**December 18, 2022**

I played an interesting character in my senior play in high school. It was not a leading role, which was unusual for me. I was Tom in *Tom Sawyer*, Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Jesus in *Godspell*, but in *Tenderloin* I played the role of Mr. Martin, the choir director, not the role of Dr. Brock, the pastor, who was the leading character.

I tried to make the most of my time on stage. With the blessing of the director, I took the role, which was written as somewhat flamboyant, shall we say, perhaps effeminate would be more accurate, and made the man raging. Given the feedback I received, the kinds of questions people asked, I think it worked out pretty well.

Joseph finds himself in a similar position. He is not the leading character, Jesus is, and after him, Mary gets a lot of time in the spotlight, rightly so. Joseph doesn't have a lot of time on stage, but he makes the most of the time he has.

In the story we have read today, the familiar Christmas story from Matthew 1, Joseph faces a challenge. He finds out the young woman to whom he is engaged, Mary, is pregnant. He could decide to end his relationship with her in a public way. She would be disgraced, at the very least. Given the teaching of Deuteronomy 22:13-21, she could be put to death. But even before God communicates with him about what is going on, Joseph graciously decides to dismiss Mary quietly.

So far so good. Joseph shows some promise. Then, when an angel of the Lord tells him in a dream that the child conceived is of the Holy Spirit and will be named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins, Joseph does as God commands and takes Mary as his wife, Jesus is

born, Joseph does well. A bit later, when an angel of the Lord tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt because Herod will try to kill the boy, Joseph does as he is told and saves Jesus' life. And when an angel of the Lord tells Joseph it is safe to go back home, he does.

The last we hear about Joseph is that he and Mary are with Jesus in Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve and asking questions in the temple, but from what we know, Joseph follows God's counsel at every turn and does what is best for his son and wife. He is a good husband, father, and man; and he follows Divine counsel whenever it is offered. As New Testament scholar Stanley Saunders has noted, Joseph is much like the patriarch with whom he shares a name (Genesis 37-50). He is moral, chaste, seeking the preservation and restoration of relationships, and attendant to God's voice in his ear (*workingpreacher.org*).

Joseph may not play a leading role, but it is an important one, and he plays it well. He may not have much time on stage, but he makes the most of what time he has.

So, beyond appreciation for one man's part in the story of salvation, what are the implications for us? For one thing, none of us has much time on the stage of life, not really, not from the perspective of history, much less eternity. Making the most of our limited time, as Joseph does, is a sacred calling. I think of the scene in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* in which Emily asks, "Does anyone ever realize life while they live it... every, every minute?" The Stage Manager replies, "No. Saints and poets maybe... they do some."

Rarely do we value life as we should, as a precious gift to be cherished every moment. It usually takes something dramatic to get our attention — the loss of a loved one, the confirmation of a feared diagnosis, a significant transition. Yet life is always limited, and thus every day is precious. Making the most of our time is a sacred calling.

Another thing we learn from Joseph is that even if we don't have a leading role, our role is important. Joseph's role may pale in

comparison to Jesus' role, and Mary's as well, but being a good father to the Messiah is not insignificant. Just because we don't have many stories about his role doesn't mean it doesn't matter. In fact, every life matters to God, every role contributes to God's realm.

It is one implication of the radical claim of incarnation that is central to the Christmas story and Christian faith. The fact that God is willing to enter this world as one of us speaks volumes about the intrinsic value of every life. The Creator of the world would not enter a meaningless life form, and even if the Creator would, that life form would not remain meaningless. The mystery of God-With-Us affirms the value of every life.

We claim this value fully in baptism, as Bella has today. We claim our identity in Christ, our true nature as beloved children of God. And we realize that because every life matters, our life matters, we make a difference in God's realm simply by being who we are called to be.

There is a rabbinic tale about the great Rebbe Zushya who on his deathbed lamented how little he had accomplished in his lifetime. When someone asked "Rebbe, are you afraid of the judgment soon to come," he almost said, "Yes," but paused before doing so, and said, "No. For when I appear before the Almighty — may the Divine Name be forever blessed — I will not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I will only be asked, 'Why were you not Zushya?'" (*Story Theology*, Terrence Tilley, p. xiv)

Joseph is not asked to be anyone other than himself. None of us is. We are simply asked to be who God has created us to be, to play our part, and to trust that in God's grace, we will make a difference.

The question is — how do we know who God has created us to be, how do we identify our role? Well, how does Joseph do this? He is willing to alter his plans in response to Divine instruction. Like Mary, who eventually responds to God's calling by saying, "Let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38)," Joseph aligns his life with what he

understands God’s calling to be. Neither Mary nor Joseph plans for this little detail in their lives, a “little detail” that completely reshapes everything for them and the rest of the world. But once they come to believe this is God’s intent for them, they embrace it fully.

How do they know it is God’s intent? Joseph is a dreamer, and God speaks to him through dreams — letting him know the child Mary carries is of the Holy Spirit, letting him know of Herod’s threat, letting him know it is safe to return home. One wonders if Joseph ever worries about the possibility that it is just something he ate... but every time, he seems to recognize that it is God who is communicating with him. Sometimes God communicates with us through dreams as well, as our hearts and minds are perhaps freer. Every aspect of our being, including our subconscious, is open.

In his book *Reaching: The Journey to Fulfillment*, Episcopal Priest and pastoral counselor Morton Kelsey describes a dream that transformed his life (p. 24). He already was considered to be a “successful” clergyman, but somewhere deep down he felt like something was missing. He questioned whether he believed all the claptrap he was preaching and just felt unsettled until he had this dream which provided insight and ultimately a path to greater clarity.

In the dream, he entered the sanctuary to lead a service but couldn’t find his vestments. Then, he couldn’t find his sermon notes — bad news for a preacher, worse news for a congregation! Next, he couldn’t find his place in the prayer book, and finally, he noticed that a dead tree had fallen through the nave of the church, causing him to wonder, even in his sleep, how the ushers could collect an offering.

With a good bit of therapy and prayerful reflection, Kelsey came to understand what his subconscious, and through it, God, was telling him— that he was a bit of fraud, he was teaching others about a faith that he had not experienced personally. He had only read and thought about it. Thus informed, Kelsey paid attention to his journey, deepened his awareness of the Holy, and thus began to practice authentic ministry.

Like Joseph and Morton Kelsey, many of us hear God's voice guiding us through dreams. Others hear God's voice in times of private devotion or in shared worship experiences. Still others hear from God in the routine of ordinary life, if we take time to notice and reflect, and often we hear from God while doing something for others. Baptist missions pioneer Annie Armstrong said that her calling came in the midst of service, not before. My experience was similar, as my calling to preach came while proclaiming the gospel, in dramatic form, while playing the role of Jesus in *Godspell*.

There are many ways God speaks to us and guides us to a clearer understanding of who we are called to be. The key lies in being open and willing to listen, and then trusting that whatever God intends for us, though it may not be what we at first desire, and though it may not seem very significant, will be fulfilling and significant in God's design.

The French Abbe Michel Quoist put it this way (*Prayers*, p. 23).

The bricklayer laid a brick on the bed of cement.  
Then, with a precise stroke of his trowel, spread another layer  
And, without a by-your-leave, laid on another brick.  
The foundations grew visibly,  
The building rose, tall and strong, to shelter men (and women).

I thought, Lord, of that poor brick buried in the darkness at  
the base of the big building.  
No one sees it, but it accomplishes its task, and the other bricks  
need it.  
Lord, what difference whether I am on the rooftop or in the  
foundations of your building, as long as I stand faithfully  
at the right place?

That's how we make the most of our time on stage.