

The Parents of God

TEXT: Luke 2:1-7

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on December 22, 2024

I'm going to name some physical and personal traits. As I go through the list, if you received what I mention from either or both of your parents, genetically or otherwise, lift a hand. For those who never knew your parents, use whoever raised you as your guide.

- Hair color
- Interest in a sport or hobby
- Allergies
- Preference for where you want to live
- Height
- Sense of style
- Eye color
- An ability that has served you well
- Shape of your chin, nose, or ears
- Moral values
- Something you really wish you hadn't inherited—and you don't have to raise your hand if you're seated next to one of your parents. I want you to have a peaceful Christmas dinner!

If you're like me, some things we inherited are obvious, others are more subtle, some passed us by entirely, and some remain to be discovered as we age. Right after I moved to my Atlanta apartment to start seminary, my mother came down from Rhode Island to help me get settled. As we talked, she asked me—and I kid you not—if I had figured out what my taxes were going to be when I got my first church.

To be clear, I was not going to be serving a church in seminary. Serving a church was years down the road. I had not even had a single day of classes, and was still in the candidacy process for ordination in my home church in Florida. But she was serious in insisting that I figure out what my taxes would be years down the road in an unknown church, in an unknown location, with an unknown salary.

I looked at her, and then I just laughed and said, “Have you been like this all my life? No wonder I have anxiety issues!” She laughed, too, and that was that. But it was also true. She HAD been like that all my life and her father, my grandfather, was worse! Either through genetics or experience—and likely a combination of both—my anxiety goes back at least two generations and probably more.

So, what does all that have to do with Christmas? We've made our way through all but the central figures in our nativity scene, looking for the truths each one shows us by their presence in the tableau, even though the way we present it in our displays isn't strictly factual. We are saving the baby Jesus figure for Christmas Eve, which leaves Mary and Joseph for this morning: The parents of Jesus.

I have titled the sermon “The parents of God,” which could be contentious in some circles. In the fourth and fifth centuries there was actually a schism in the church over whether Mary could be called, in Greek, *theotokos*, which means “the one who gives birth to God.” Some preferred, *Christotokos*, the one who gives birth to Christ, but at the Council of Ephesus in the year 431, the church solidified Mary as the *theotokos*, since the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that Jesus is fully God as well as fully human.

Joseph is another matter, since he was not involved in the pregnancy; but in marrying Mary before Jesus was born, Joseph was the legal father of Jesus and was the man Jesus knew from birth as his dad. Those of you who were raised by one or more non-biological parents, know that the impact of those who raise a child goes well beyond inherited genes. The most important features of our lives—our values, the way we treat others, our self-esteem, our ability to trust, to be resilient in difficult times, and often specific skill sets—all that and more come from those who raised us, whether or not those people had a biological connection to us.

And so, I found myself this week pondering the question, “How was Jesus shaped by the particular personalities and characteristics of his parents?” He obviously didn’t have my mother’s anxiety about taxes, as he pulled his own taxes from the mouth of a fish. “It’ll work out, Mom,” he might have said. But surely there were ways that the particular people who raised Jesus left their mark on his life.

Further, the Bible is clear that God made a very particular choice in having Jesus raised by Mary and Joseph. There were, no doubt, many faithful young maids who might have been chosen. Why did God send Gabriel to Mary specifically? And, once the pregnancy was made known to Joseph, he thought seriously enough about ending the engagement that God had to intervene in a dream to keep him involved. If Joseph’s influence wasn’t needed, God could have let him go. Why did God want those particular individuals? Where might we look to find the traits of Mary and Joseph in Jesus?

I think it’s a useful frame, because at Christmas we tend to focus on the “fully God” part of who Jesus was. Our Nativity scenes remind us of all the miracles—the star and those pagan astronomers who followed it to Bethlehem; the angels appearing to shepherds to bring good news of peace for all people. And that’s not wrong—if Jesus were just a random human baby, we wouldn’t have the holiday.

But Mary and Joseph remind us that Christian doctrine has always proclaimed that Jesus was fully human, as well as fully God. And being fully human means you have fully human parents who shape you in ways both subtle and obvious.

The influence of Mary is easier to discern, simply because we have much, much more of her story in the Bible. From the appearance of Gabriel announcing her pregnancy to a different angel announcing Jesus’ resurrection and everything in-between, we see a truly amazing woman.

I spent far too long this week trying to find out where the phrase, “Gentle Mary, meek and mild” comes from. I thought it was from a carol, but the closest I could come was “Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger.” What kept popping up in my search results for “Gentle Mary, meek and mild” were countless sermons, by both men and women, challenging that phrase in no uncertain terms.

When Gabriel made that house call to Mary and she said yes, she accepted what could easily have been a death sentence. She was engaged to Joseph, which was in that day and time a legally binding arrangement. If Joseph said, “That baby is not mine,” he would have been within his rights to have her stoned for adultery.

And even if Joseph “put her away quietly,” as Matthew tells us he was considering; a woman with a child out of wedlock would not have a chance at a husband, and without either a husband or the charity mandated for widows, God would have had to send her into the wilderness to raise the child alone and provide food from the ravens or something.

Mary was a faithful, Jewish woman, but it took nerves of steel and unshakable trust in God to say to the angel, “Let it be to me according to your word.” But she absorbs the message, and lives out the final trimester of her pregnancy with her cousin Elizabeth, where she praises God and expresses her belief that the son she carries will lift up the lowly and pull the powerful down from their thrones.

We’ll come back to her life with Joseph in a minute, but it’s obvious from the Gospel accounts that Joseph was not alive by the time Jesus began his ministry. So, Mary dealt with being the mother of both a famous and, in the circles of power, infamous son; and on at least one occasion tried to bring things down to a dull roar by showing up where he was teaching and trying to bring him back home out of the spotlight.

Finally, her worst fears come to pass, and her son is executed by the state in the cruelest and most humiliating manner possible, as she sat at the foot of the cross, unable to do a thing about it. In my experience in ministry, there is no emotional wound as utterly devastating as losing a child. To compound that with the trauma of violence and watching it all is beyond my ability to comprehend.

Mary was also at the tomb to hear the words of that other angel, saw her son alive again; and then lost him again at his ascension. At the cross, one of Jesus’ last words was to give Mary over to the charge of John, the son of Zebedee, one of his closest disciples, and likely a relative. Church tradition tells us that Mary lived out her days in John’s care in Ephesus.

Whoever coined the phrase, “Gentle Mary, meek and mild,” obviously never experienced half of what Mary did, never dared what she dared to do, never kept going through the hardest of life’s adversities. I’d phrase it something like, “Resilient Mary, strong and brave.”

I see what Jesus endures physically as almost a mirror image of what Mary endures emotionally, and with her standing there at the foot of the cross, I don't have to wonder where he got it from—his own ability to show grace in excruciating pain, his willingness to do whatever it took to follow God's will and point people toward the justice that would, one day, make for peace. And, who knows, maybe Jesus had Mary's eyes.

For clues about what Jesus got from Joseph, we have to look deeper. After the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve, Joseph is never mentioned again. Many think Joseph was much older than Mary and died shortly after that last mention in the Bible. But that need not have been the case.

Likely Joseph died before Jesus' ministry, but we have zero accounts of Jesus or any of his family between the ages of 12 and 30, when his ministry begins. The average life expectancy for a man in the Roman Colony of Palestine in the first century was 29 years. That average is pulled down due to high infant mortality, but if Joseph made 50, he was doing very, very well. And he was not a wealthy man, which cuts his odds of making it that long. Joseph was a carpenter, he most likely labored until he died.

So, if Joseph was 20 when Jesus was born, Joseph would have been at a very advanced age for a man of his time and status, by the time Jesus was 30. Even if Joseph was 16 when Jesus was born, that would still be pushing it to be alive 30 years later at age 46. So, we don't know for sure, but Joseph was not necessarily a lot older than Mary when the Gospel stories open. It's more certain that he died when Jesus was somewhere between the ages of 12 and 29.

Matthew is the Gospel that mentions Joseph the most, with three angelic appearances to him. I'm not sure what to make of it, but in three appearances of angels to Joseph, they all appear in his dreams. The first is to let him know that Mary's account of her pregnancy is accurate, and he should go through with the marriage. The second is right before Herod slaughters the boys under two years old in Bethlehem and provides a warning to take the family and flee to Egypt.

Joseph does just that; and then the third angelic dream is after Herod dies and Joseph is told that it's safe to go back home. Matthew says there's another warning dream about settling in Judea, although no angels are mentioned, and so Joseph and family continue north and settle in Nazareth, which is where Joseph had been when he became engaged to Mary.

From those accounts, we can assume certain traits about Joseph. First, he is a responsible husband and father. We know nothing about their early sojourn in Egypt, other than that everybody is able to return none the worse for wear. I mentioned last week that Joseph and Mary were poor, which we know because of the offering they made at the Temple eight days after Jesus' birth. They offered two doves, which was the prescribed offering for those who couldn't afford a larger animal.

Also, from the Bible we know that Joseph was a carpenter. That means he had a skill that would be useful in any culture, making it likely that Joseph was a carpentry gig worker during their stay in Egypt to make ends meet. That he both went with his family and came back shows us a man who was brave, enterprising, and faithful to God's will as he understood it. He was responsible and careful and, upon their return, wise.

Nazareth was a very small, non-descript town without so much as a public monument in it. When Philip decides to follow Jesus as a disciple and runs off to find his brother Nathanael to recruit him, too, Nathanael responds to his brother, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

But what was handy about Nazareth was that it was close to the city of Sepphoris which, during the first century, was being rebuilt and restored to provide a second home for the king. Some believe that Mary's home had been in Sepphoris, which is just 4 miles NW of Nazareth and was the capital city of the Galilee region.

All that rebuilding meant that carpentry skills would be in high demand. A carpenter in that day and time meant more than just working with wood. Joseph had to be skilled in building anything needed for the construction of a home or other building. Carpenters thatched roofs, plastered walls, built shelves and furniture and whatever else. It also included cutting down the trees and making the boards that would be used.

Joseph would have also made farming equipment and other wooden items, including—in a cruel twist—crosses for executions. This is absolutely pure speculation on my part, but it's possible that the young Jesus saw his father carrying a cross Joseph had made to wherever they were stored.

To say that Joseph was a carpenter is to say that he was broadly skilled and physically strong. And, while you might think that such in-demand skills would demand a high price, that was not the case for those who labored under a king who, himself, reported to an emperor.

You don't get paid what you're worth when you labor for a king. The spoils go to the top and you barely get by. It's quite likely that Joseph did hard physical labor for subsistence wages until the day he died—a situation that may have ensured that he did not live long enough to see Jesus begin his ministry.

The situation in Sepphoris and surrounding towns—as the king not only took all the laborers, but took all the farmland and leased it back to the former owners to farm for a subsistence wage with now no land to grow food for themselves—adds some punch to Mary's words that cry for justice in the Magnificat. She was hoping what most of Israel was hoping in an occupied country with a cruel and oppressive king. Bring down those on their thrones and lift the people up!

It's likely that Joseph didn't have much time to kick around at home, except on the Sabbath. He was a hard and diligent worker. But did that mean he had little influence on the young Jesus? Unlikely. Again, these are assumptions—the Bible tells us details about only 3 years and few months of Jesus' 33 years on this earth. But it would certainly have been common for a son to learn his father's trade, something that was even more likely in a poor household when extra wages from a second laborer would have been an enormous help.

A Jewish boy became a Jewish man, and subject to Jewish law, at age 13. It seems reasonable to me that, after that trip to Jerusalem when he was 12, Jesus would have worked alongside his father for the years his father lived and then continued to provide for the family after whatever point Joseph died.

That work would have made Jesus physically strong and could explain the incredible physical stamina that is evidenced in the Gospels from the night he is arrested through the crucifixion. Carpentry is a profession where it's easy to be injured in ways large and small. If he worked alongside his dad, Jesus likely was pierced by nails long before the last day of his life. He might, also, have carried crosses before.

More importantly, seeing the plight of his father—providing endless skilled and hard physical labor for no real reward, and perhaps shortening his father's life in the process—could well have strengthened Jesus' unflagging commitment to justice and care for the poor, that we find in his ministry. Jesus would have gotten that from both his mother and his father, not to mention all of his neighbors in Nazareth.

When Jesus started his ministry proclaiming to the crowd, "Blessed are the poor," he might have been pronouncing a blessing on his own parents. And abuse of the poor, through the monetary systems of God's Temple no less, might have made him mad enough to flip some tables.

The symbol of our nativity set—in its totality—is a statement of God's values. It includes foreign kings as well as the disregarded shepherds and an assortment of beasts whose destiny was either to be food or to be worked until they couldn't anymore. At the center is a newborn infant, totally at the mercy of those around him.

The two people chosen to be the parents of that baby weren't divine beings or trust-fund babies. They had no power or importance in society. God could have started Jesus off with a leg up in life by choosing different parents. But no. Through his parents Jesus learned what it is like to be fully human in a society where the powerful were striving to be gods and he was at the bottom of the ladder. He learned to work hard; while also learning that working until you drop is a guarantee of almost nothing in a world where justice is selective and capricious and the poor are seen as an expendable resource.

Through Mary and Joseph, Jesus first experienced his Jewish faith through their words and their deeds, making that faith his own as he entered his thirteenth year. He saw what it meant in real life to endure hardship, to have courage, and to fulfill your obligations. He worked hard and listened for the voice of God, just as they did. It was their teaching and example that allowed him to pass the tests presented to him by Satan for forty days in the wilderness, the experience that marked the beginning of his public ministry.

As it turns out, the qualities needed to be the parents of Jesus are the qualities needed to be a good parent of any child; and are nothing more than Jesus asks of every disciple. Which is the whole point of the Incarnation in the first place. The Word of God made flesh, dwelling among us, as one of us; showing us how to live faithfully in this broken world, loving God by loving our neighbors as ourselves, even when none of that is easy, even when the deck is stacked against you.

Jesus is our example for how to live a life of faithful love in this world. We learn that from him. He learned it from his parents; so let us turn in the bulletin and take out our figures if we have them to bless Mary and Joseph.

Blessing of Mary and Joseph: **God, you blessed the living Mary and Joseph long ago. Bless now their memory in our figures that they might inspire us to care for all children as Joseph and Mary once cared for you. Amen.**