

Sermon (12/24/16, Matthew 1: 18-25):

In the early nineties, a television series entitled ‘Dinosaurs’ premiered. The characters were, of course, all dinosaurs given human characteristics as they played a typical middle class American family. Earl, the Dad, was a blue collar worker trying to cope with his demanding boss. Fran was the nurturing, long suffering spouse, Robbie the rebellious teenager, and Charlene the shop-till-you-drop daughter.

Early in the show, a new family member was introduced. Being that they were dinosaurs, this new addition was birthed from a very large egg that sat on a table in the family’s house. As the family gathered around this egg for the big day, the shell cracked open to reveal a tiny dinosaur who, interestingly enough, had a full vocabulary. As he toppled over, still half stuck in the egg, his first words were, ‘Where’s the Mama? Where’s the Mama?’

Eventually, the name the baby chose for his Dad was, ‘Not the Mama’. Repeatedly the baby would say it when sitting on his father’s shoulders, conking him on the head with a pan. ‘Not the Mama! Not the Mama!’

These scenes were memorable for my family because these ‘not the mama’ refrains sounded all too familiar. For my toddler daughter there were just some things that a father’s touch could not satisfy such as when she was distressed, hungry, or for no particular reason at all. Sometimes, only the Mama would do.

Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth narrative is quite a bit different than the more familiar Luke version. In essence, it is the ‘not the mama’ version as its focus shifts from Mary to the mysterious figure of Joseph who would become Jesus’ adopted earthly father.

I have always found it interesting that in the context of such a highly patriarchal world in which the Bible was written Joseph seems to be such an enigmatic figure.

When it comes to Mary we know the story of Gabriel’s appearance to her to announce she would give birth to God’s son. We hear of her visit to her relative Elizabeth who would be the mother of John the Baptist. Mary even pops up a few times during Jesus’ ministry and is present at the foot

of Jesus' cross.

Joseph quickly disappears from the scene following Jesus' birth and childhood, never to be heard from again.

Perhaps this is the reason why we typically find the little statuettes of Joseph in our manger scenes standing off to the side or hovering close-by in guardian mode while Jesus lies in the manger under the adoring gaze of Mary. We know Mary better. Maybe it even reflects a bit of our own gender bias when it comes to the care and nurture of children.

Speaking from my own experience, the differences between fatherhood and motherhood was something I noticed early on. The relationship a woman has with the child she carries in her womb is very different than a man's. There's a physical and emotional intimacy a Mom shares with that unborn child which a Dad lacks. Yes, sometimes he can feel the child kick or hear the child's heart beat during an ultrasound but it's different. Not better or worse, just different. There's something that doesn't feel real and intimate about that relationship until that baby is actually first held in a Dad's arms. For me, I have often described that moment as the time when I discovered a depth of love I never knew existed. To this day, those feelings remain unchanged.

Joseph is quite the intriguing figure. I wish we knew more about him because, in his own right, he seems to have been quite the remarkable person.

It would have been interesting, for instance, to hear about the moment when Mary told Joseph she was pregnant.

*Uh...Joseph, I have something important to tell you.*

*Not now, Mary, I'm tired. It's been a long day. I had a terrible time fixing Mrs. Friedman's door and she just wouldn't stop talking the whole time. I just can't absorb another word, Mary. Maybe later.*

*No, Joseph, it's really important. We need to talk now.*

*Sounds serious, Mary. Are you sick? Did someone hurt you? Am I in trouble? No, Joseph, I'm pregnant.*

*You're what? How? With whom? I'll kill him!*

*Joseph, you don't understand. It's a miracle. I have God's son in my womb. An angel told me. We're going to be the parents of the Messiah!*

*An angel? The Messiah? A miracle? You must have thought long and hard to come up with that one, Mary! This is not going to work, Mary! I'm done. I'm finished.*

Most likely, Joseph and Mary's betrothal was arranged by their parents but, even so, it's clear that Joseph cared a great deal about Mary and even though he must have been hurting pretty badly, his desire was to not destroy her. Joseph must have been one tortured soul as he wrestled with this news – torn between anger, hurt, and love.

We're finally told that Joseph resolved to dismiss Mary quietly so as not to expose her to public disgrace. We can only imagine the sleepless nights, the anguished thoughts, maybe even the tears Joseph spilled to come to this resolution.

Finally, exhausted by this emotional distress, Joseph falls into a deep sleep and an angel speaks to him.

*Joseph, I know this isn't what you expected. The angel says. But it's going to be ok. God is about to do something wonderful even though according to Jewish custom and law this is quite the socially unacceptable situation. It's okay. Don't give up on Mary. What she has told you is true and she needs you. God needs you.*

'When Joseph awoke from his sleep, he did exactly as the angel commanded him to do.' Matthew tells us.

Really?! Joseph just bounced out of bed the next morning and made a complete 'about face' from what he originally planned to do?

Now, I've had some crazy dreams before. Dreams so real and powerful I've had to lie in bed for a while, after waking up, to figure out if they were real. Dreams that have haunted me. Never, however, have I bounced out of bed in the morning convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that this dream was the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

For one, bouncing out of bed isn't something I normally do.

Secondly, just because I might have dreamed that I was standing behind this pulpit, naked, doesn't mean that I've ever been tempted to go collarless up here. (I know you're all quite thankful for that!)

How did Joseph do it? What was it about that dream which convinced Joseph he needed to take it seriously and, even more so,

literally!

Of course, I would never do such a thing. I mean I'm a Seminary graduate. I've been trained and certified in interpreting God's Word. I understand that the Bible is filled with lots of metaphors and nuances that make it difficult to interpret. I know it takes a lot more work than a silly dream to figure out what's God's Word and what's a bad case of indigestion. One has to do their homework. Yes, I'm an expert and I have a diploma to prove it. There will be no jumping out of bed and sudden reversals of plans, just because of some weird dream, on my watch!

You know in some ways, Mary had it a bit easier. At least Mary's angel visitation happened during the day, while she was fully awake. And then there was that whole Elizabeth thing to confirm the Angel's words.

What did 'Not the Mama' Joseph get? A dream! A lot would rise and fall on what Joseph did next, yet all he gets is some weird dream!

I mean Moses at least had a burning bush. For Jesus, the skies parted when he was baptized. Peter, James and John had a mountain top experience that knocked their socks off or, at least, their sandals.

'Not the Mama' Joseph gets a dream...that's it. And what's even more amazing is it's enough. For Joseph, it was enough.

I guess it's a good reminder that sometimes what we need is a Joseph kind of faith. Sometimes God calls us to do some really important, life altering, even dangerously convention busting stuff by way of little more than a dream that gets under our skin, or an urge we can't seem to shake, or a whisper that seems as nutty as a Reese's candy bar but as critical as Joseph taking Mary to be his wife, or a still small voice beckoning us to hope again, to live again, and to believe again in the God who is with us still, even to the end of the age.

Don't worry, this doesn't mean that I'm going to show up naked in the pulpit tomorrow, which I'm pretty sure is very good news for everyone, but it does mean that maybe even 'not the mama' moments can be pretty important and amazing too.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.