

COURSE CORRECTION

Matthew 1:18-25 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Rev. Renee Hoke
December 18, 2016 First Christian Church Wichita Falls, Texas

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

In a variety of conversations with my church family over the last week, I have been reminded of the power of tradition. For example, the insistence on a set menu for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners—not just the menu stays the same, but the recipes must be stay the same. If you grew up on Aunt Cora’s cornbread dressing then there can be no deviation from the true and proper recipe. And what about the confusion that results from someone marrying into the family—someone who has never seen marshmallows on top of the sweet potatoes?

And don’t even mention the traditional location for annual gatherings during the Christmas season! I heard about a group of church friends

whose tradition for many years has been that to go to the same house where the same hostess must prepare for the Christmas party.

“Is that because the hostess refuses to take turns?” I asked.

“Oh, no!” they explained. “We all agreed up front that no one would raise a hand when she asks for volunteers to host the next party. She’s the best hostess and we like her house the best.”

Hmm. Do you suppose it’s possible to become of victim of tradition?

For almost 2,000 years it has been the tradition of Christians to gather together on these Sundays leading up to Christmas and pour over the same key passages of scripture in order to prepare for the birth of the Messiah.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way... we read in the Gospel of Matthew.

Each Sunday we open our Bibles to one of these passages, and, like a prism, we hold the verses up and turn them back in forth, noticing how the Light is reflected in the words that we know by heart. New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have done just that in their book *The First Christmas*. They celebrate the differences between the details found in Luke and those found in Matthew and encourage us to let both stories stand on their own and resist the need to “homogenize” them into a single account. For example, it takes Luke 132 verses to tell the story beginning with the news that Elizabeth and Zechariah are in the family way. Luke helps us stand in Mary’s shoes and see the events from her perspective. By contrast, Matthew’s nativity story is only 31 verses, a

story told with the precision of a skilled carpenter from the point-of-view of Joseph.

There's a lot we don't know about Joseph. That makes every clue all the more important. Here's what Adam Hamilton writes in his book *The Journey*.

No one ever prays 'Hail, Joseph, full of grace. The Lord is with thee.' Joseph doesn't have a book of the New Testament named for him. He has no honorific title. None of his words are preserved in Scripture, and he is only mentioned a handful of times in the Bible. But perhaps this is precisely the lesson we're meant to learn from Joseph. He was a simple, humble man who did what God asked. In the story of Joseph, we find once more that God demonstrates a propensity to choose and use people who live in relative obscurity and whose lives and spirits reflect true humility.

How do we know about Joseph's profession? It isn't mentioned in our passage from Matthew. It is the Gospel of Mark that tells us Joseph is a carpenter. In chapter 6 of Mark the people in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth are amazed at his teaching in the synagogue, and someone remarks "How does he work such miracles? Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon?" You notice that this is a reference to Jesus as a carpenter and then we must infer that Jesus learned the trade from his earthly father Joseph.

Here's Adam Hamilton again:

So little is known about Joseph that by the beginning of the second century, Christians began to develop traditions about him—traditions that are not likely historically accurate, although we cannot be sure. They began to teach that Joseph was an elderly widower when he married Mary; one source says he was 93 at the time and lived to be 111, dying when Jesus was 18. This tradition seemed to have developed as a way of asserting that a kind elderly gentleman took Mary in to care for her, and since he was more like a grandfather than a husband, the marriage was never consummated and Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. The brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in Mark and Matthew, well they could have been Joseph's children from his first wife.

This tradition of an older Joseph was claimed by the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians but Protestants generally chose to put it aside. Protestants assume that Joseph was likely the age of any other young man getting married in the first century—which would be 14 or 15.

How did the world around him look to this young carpenter just starting out in life? I decided I needed to do some carpentry research to give me some insight into Joseph, so Friday I visited the carpentry shop of our own Bob Hayes. You may not know that Bob is the lead carpenter these days for the construction projects by Disciples Men throughout our region. At least once a year, usually around Spring Break, men from congregations across Texas spend a week together building a church or a

conference center or some other sacred space. Think of it like a barn raising, only it's a church structure. When it's time for Disciples Men to go to work, Bob and his son Kristian fill up a trailer with almost all the tools in Bob's shop. That's a lot of tools. Once they arrive at the work site, there will be several other men have also brought along a trailer of tools. Bob tells me it takes a while at the end of each work day for all the tools to get sorted and returned to the right trailer.

During the tour of Bob's carpentry shop on Friday I saw some of the tools Bob inherited from his granddad including an impressive table saw in the center of the room. Bob's granddad was a railroad man who did carpentry on the side, but Bob's dad Robert made his living as a carpenter. "I am not the carpenter my dad was," Bob says. His dad had a special passion for remodeling where a good carpenter has to improvise as he goes along because removing a wall or even a cabinet might reveal a whole new set of challenges that must be addressed. It takes patience and imagination in equal parts for that kind of carpentry. Bob tells me he prefers the relative predictability of new construction.

Bob tells me he was 10 or 11 years old when he first started assisting his granddad in his shop and learning the basics of carpentry. In spite of all the new technology, Bob says one of his favorite tools still today is a folding wooden ruler. That's how he learned to measure as a little boy, and it's working fine for him here at the close of 2016.

Can you imagine Jesus learning the trade from his dad—learning how to measure carefully before you cut the wood? I bet Joseph taught Jesus to take good care of his tools, to keep his shop neat and orderly. Joseph taught Jesus to honor his commitments, to put in an honest day's labor, to take pride in what he built.

So now that we're working to fill in the blanks on this man named Joseph, can you imagine how a careful and conscientious man like Joseph took the news that Mary was pregnant? How do you suppose Joseph reacted to Mary's explanation? Matthew tells us that Joseph who was a righteous man planned to dismiss Mary quietly which most definitely indicates that Joseph didn't believe Mary's story. If he had believed Mary, he wouldn't look for a way to break off their engagement. There's a good chance that Joseph heard the news when he visited Mary in the home of her cousin Elizabeth. Adam Hamilton imagines Joseph walking back home to Nazareth after this world altering conversation with his fiancée. It would take about 90 minutes for a man to walk that distance. Ninety minutes to blow off steam and work through all the pain of being betrayed and then think about what happens to his reputation in the community. There would most definitely be gossip. But it wouldn't take long for an honorable man like Joseph to push his feelings aside and focus on what will happen to Mary when the news gets out. Being betrothed was a legal commitment in the first century and justice for a woman who committed

adultery meant that she was put to death. Joseph's broken heart was nothing compared to Mary's life.

For a man who made his living by following plans in a neat and orderly way, Joseph must have thought that God's way of sending his Son into the world didn't make sense. It was complete chaos. I know plenty of believers who contend that when God is behind a change or a new direction, you can tell because it seems like the waters part and things quickly fall into place. Sometimes that's true. But it is equally the case that following God's plan disrupts the order of things. Sometimes the sign that God is at work is that life as we know it is turned on its head. Based on the stories of heroes in the Bible, God the Creator seems to be a cross between a careful carpenter and a mad scientist.

As God watched his plans unfold, surely God knew that Joseph was in over his head. God knew that Joseph needed some help sorting it all out. He wasn't capable of making such a drastic course correction in his own. Thank God for the dream that Matthew tells us about. The dream gave Joseph some peace and helped him chart a new course. He was able to align himself with what God was doing through Mary.

Back to Adam Hamilton again. He writes:

While we don't read it explicitly in the Gospels, we can infer from the life and teachings of Jesus the profound impact Joseph had on Jesus' faith. Later in his life, when Jesus looked for a metaphor to describe his relationship—and ours—to God, Jesus used the Aramaic word for Papa.

Long before the boy Jesus could fully understand God's plan for the salvation of the world through his life, Jesus knew the love of Joseph, his earthly Papa, and that kind and patient man helped him understand what it means to love God with all your heart and mind and spirit. Later Jesus would tell a story where an earthly father was a symbol of God's grace. You remember the story, the worried father who races down a dusty road to take a tired and hungry young man into his arms and welcome him home.

It is likely that Joseph was gone by the time Jesus launched his public ministry. We see no evidence of him in the Gospels. But this man Joseph who quietly altered the course of his life for the sake of God's plan, he lives on today in the stories Jesus tells about a father's love.