

Last week, the Prophet Isaiah defined that the Lord's highway is the joyous journey leading us home. For this journey, God has come to walk with us every step of the way. Today, the last Sunday of Advent, Love Sunday, we highlight Joseph in the Christmas story.

In the Bible, there are two versions of the Christmas story. They are in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. In Luke's version, Joseph, a bystander, hardly appears in the story. However, in Matthew's version, Joseph is more than a bystander. He has a central role. It is Mary, in Matthew's version, who gets short shrift in the story. Yet, even here, it all seems to be happening to Joseph. He is a responder, not a producer.

I think that is why Joseph doesn't figure into our stories all that often. We want to be in control of our lives. We want to take charge, don't we? We get frustrated when things happen to us that are beyond our control. And when we think about it, things that are beyond our control always happen to us. Always!

Too often, we feel like bystanders in our lives, let alone in the Christmas whirlwind. We had plans. What happened to them? Well, life happened to them. Life happened to us. Everything has gone out of control. We sometimes feel helpless and put upon, watching the world go by.

That is the moment when we need Joseph mostly. Things were happening to Joseph. There is no argument about it. His plans were out of control—out of his control. Something or someone else had taken charge of his life. So, now what?

Well, he had a choice. That's the thing that we often forget at times like this. That is the perspective we can lose sight of when life overwhelms us. There is still a choice to be made. We still have input to give.

Joseph had to decide what he would do when life happened to him. He thought about it and decided to do the kindest thing he could think of. He would divorce Mary quietly. Jewish law gave him a range of options in cases like this one. He was allowed to consider how to punish Mary for this breach of the covenant. He could have publicly humiliated her to restore his status since he was the wronged

person in this relationship. He could have had her stoned to death or driven her out of the community.

Out of all, Joseph chose the lightest of the options for Mary. He was simply going to set her aside. The covenant was already broken. The marriage that was legalized, if not yet celebrated and consummated, was over. It was the best option he could choose for the situation. Matthew tells us that he chose this option because he was a righteous man.

In the Bible, righteousness is the highest of concepts. In various places in the Bible, it is used as a descriptor for God. The Bible even says that no one is righteous (Romans 3:10) but only God. Exceptionally, however, Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man.

Righteousness simply means being faithful to our covenants. We are righteous when we keep our promises, fulfill the law, and are obedient. The Bible is the story of the keeping and the breaking of covenants. Joseph was a keeper of the covenant. He was a rule follower. He was a promise keeper. What he needed were other options. And God gave him those options in a dream.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "...the child that is conceived in her [Mary] IS of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). What an outrageous claim this would be for Joseph! And yet, he chose to buy in and stay married to Mary.

The Bible does not tell us what Joseph had to endure to accept this incredible, world-changing notion that somehow God had chosen Mary, his Mary, to be the vessel, the portal into our world. We also don't get the details of what happened between the nighttime visitation from an angel of the Lord and the birth of an infant baby born to Mary named by Joseph. We don't know what happened to them or in them. The Bible does not tell us about it.

Our choices are not always easy to make or to keep. The consequences of our choices are sometimes painful, but there are always choices. We have a choice to be bystanders in our own lives or play the main role. We can, like Joseph, make the hard choice to believe that God is at work and that God is present, even in the most troubling of situations. We can choose to be obedient to the call to commit ourselves to follow, honor, and keep our covenants, even when it becomes difficult to do so. Because Joseph chose to enter into the story, to be more than a bystander

to the story, the Lord's highway leading us home was established through the infant child born to Mary, born to Joseph, and born to the world. In the end, Joseph's role in the Christmas story was to name the child—Jesus, Emmanuel, who is with us, helps us get on the Lord's highway, and guides us to continue our journey on the Lord's highway.

The Lord's highway did not just happen to us. First of all, God has made a hard decision to send His only begotten Son, Jesus, our Emmanuel God, to us, out of His love for us. Jesus also has made a hard decision to embed God's mission within Himself to born, suffer, die, and resurrect for us. To accomplish God's mission to lead us on the Lord's highway, we also need to make a decision and be a keeper of the decision. Our decision matters on the Lord's highway. What is your decision for today? The answer is yours. Amen.