



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Joseph's Story

### **Sermon for Christmas Eve, family service, 2016**

*Readings:* Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20; Psalm 96

*Sermon text:* O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.* (from Collect for Christmas)

My name is Joseph and I lived a long time ago. But you know that part of the story. I have come down from from heaven today to tell you the rest of the story.

It is the night of my son's birthday. Well, my adopted son. As St Matthew wrote in his gospel—the only one in which I get any lines at all—I was not eager at first to accept this child of Mary's as my son. When she told me she was pregnant—though we were not yet married and had not had any marital relations—well, as you can imagine, I was upset. She talked about an angelic visit and a child by the Holy Spirit of God, but I figured she was making up a story to cover her shame. Something had happened she couldn't tell me about—and what way is that to begin a marriage? Had a Roman soldier raped her? She said, no; she stuck to her story. I was going to quietly end our engagement and go my way. But that night I had a dream in which an angel came to me, and told me Mary was telling the truth, the child was from God. And I needed to be there to protect and care for her and the child—which I should name Jesus, God saves.

That's always been the way it works with me. I am too hard-headed to listen to my wife; I have to hear it from God in my dreams; that gets around my logical objections. And then I see what was probably obvious to her.

Well, the baby came—and so did three wise men from the east bearing gifts. Matthew tells their story too. But what is less often told is the story of what happened after they left. King Herod, tipped off by the visitors that a new king was born, felt threatened and sent soldiers go to Bethlehem to kill all the male children under two years of age—for that was how long ago the wise men said the star had risen. In another dream, God warned me to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. So I did. We were refugees from a terrible ruler.

So much has changed—yet still today we see refugees trying to save their children. So much has changed, yet still we see that the peace of Caesar is always bought with the blood of others; while the peace of God—the peace Jesus brought—was bought with the price of his own blood.

Being a refugee is a hard life—but we managed, until the time came when Herod died and we returned north—ending up, finally, in Nazareth. We raised our family there—Jesus and then his brothers and sisters. James was his oldest brother. I had a small business as a carpenter building furniture and doors for the gentiles in the city over the hill. As they grew up the boys worked with me.

Jesus was a good carpenter, but I could tell his heart wasn't really in it. For one thing, he was smart and loved to read and learn. Got that from his mother I think. I was just a working man, never did get much of an education. But Jesus learned to read the Bible and he memorized a good part of it. When he was 12 or 13 I told him the truth about his father. He was not as surprised as I expected. And the next time we went up to Jerusalem, he stayed back. We only realized it a day later—and then when we went back to look for him, we finally found him in the Temple. Of course that's where to find me, he said, in my Father's house.

After that he would work and then study and pray. I loved him, but I have to admit I didn't really understand him.

Now I was older than Mary and the years of hard work got to me and I died when Jesus was just a young man. Jesus stayed around and ran the business until his brothers were old enough to care for the family. But once his brother James was old enough to take over the shop, he went down to the River Jordan to live with his cousin John—they called him the Baptist. He was around thirty at the time—and still unmarried. He knew he had a different destiny than other young men from the village.

All the rest of the story I saw from heaven—and you know what he did, how he taught and healed, welcomed the stranger and outcast, gathered disciples and followers right up to the time he went to Jerusalem and was hailed as messiah. That's when once again, the rulers of Jerusalem felt threatened and sent armed men to arrest him; they planned to have him killed on a pumped-up charge of blasphemy. Most men would have tried to raise an army and fight, but Jesus went quietly. At first I was like, no, fight. But then, just like his mother, he knew things I had trouble understanding. He said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. He knew a new kind of model of kingship was needed. He knew the people needed to learn from the heart to love one another, not to be told by law how to behave. He knew the way of God comes from following truth, not obeying power. He was not afraid of any man, not even Caesar or his puppet, Pilate. He was so sure in his faith that he went to the cross believing God would save him.

Which is why it was so painful to hear him cry, my God why have you forsaken me, and die. My heart broke. I think the Father's heart was breaking too. We all felt it. I thought it was over. That I would see my boy here in heaven but his time on earth was done. But once again God had other plans. He raised Jesus up on the third day and he stayed on earth to teach his disciples the good news for another 40 days. Then he came up to the Father—the one he called Abba. And they are always together, one God with the Holy Spirit.

I will always be his earthly father though, his Dad, and for that I thank God every moment for that awesome honor. And now eternally we are together—our family—and all those whom God loves—and that includes just about everybody one way or another. Of course some make it hard and learn the hard way. Like me I guess. But sooner or later God will prevail. That is just the way it is.

Tonight I remember that first night. Holding baby Jesus, looking into his eyes while his little hand gripped my finger. I knew this was no dream. I had a job: to protect and provide for this child and his mother.

And so do all of us here tonight, young and old, have a God-given job: Protect and provide for the children everywhere, especially those in need—and for mother earth, now threatened as never before. God has given you a great gift—life—to use for good. God has given you a mind; learn well and think clearly. God has given you a heart and speaks to you in the whispers of dreams and the call of noble ideals. Follow them. They will lead you into life, life abundant, life eternal.

Merry Christmas. And peace on earth, good will among all people.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector  
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY