Christianity begins with the familiar story of a family. It’s a story that we treasure year in and out. It’s a story that we share in Scripture and song. It’s a story that we enjoy in processions and pageants. It’s a story that we see in nativity scenes set up on church lawns and in carefully placed miniatures on our mantles at home. It’s a story that some are also telling in an updated version which I’m glad to show you today—better late than never—featuring slides from the much-acclaimed and variously named Modern, Hipster or Millennial Nativity.

The Christmas story is powerful because its central event—the miracle birth of God’s Son, our Savior—occurs amid the miracle of human birth. Who of us, upon seeing a newborn baby doesn’t also sense God’s presence and love?

In our celebration of Jesus’ birth, the Christ child and his mother deservedly draw most of our attention. As we noted last Sunday, Mary was devoted to God’s Word. She discerned God’s will and fulfilled the work God had for her to do. We rightly reflect on Mary’s role and responsibility. We honor her faith and God’s faithfulness.

Yet, if we look at the principle figures who crowd the stage that first Christmas—mother and child, angels and kings, prophets and prophetesses, shepherds and wise men, there may be one person whom we hardly notice. Still this individual is an important person with an important story to tell.

Near the manger, but not too near, stands Joseph. He’s always part of the Christmas scenery. We usually imagine him leading the donkey, knocking on the door of the inn, or standing solemnly next to Mary. But most of the time that’s all he is, just part of the scenery. Yet, Joseph has much to tell us about the child in the manger. For as little attention as we pay to him, it may be that among all the assembled cast, Joseph knows most intimately the identity of this child who has come among us as we continue our Advent worship series, Family Portrait.

If you study the brief verses of our Scripture text, you’ll discover a dramatic subplot to the Christmas story. As matters unfold behind the scenes, we find Joseph wrestling with three issues. The first issue that Joseph grappled with was an internal conflict. While the various issues which may concern you or me today are altogether different from the issues which Joseph faced, who of us cannot relate? Who of us isn’t grappling with a conflict or struggle for which we see no good reason? This leads us to a first truth we can draw from this morning’s Scripture text.

1. Facing conflict I must prayerfully seek wisdom and patiently wait on God

Perhaps one reason that Joseph’s story is so seldom told is that we prefer to steer clear of conflict at Christmas—at least we’d rather not bring it into the open on Sunday morning at church. It’s much more pleasant to think of Joseph as sitting in the stable, being quietly supportive of Mary and the baby, than to think of what Joseph may have said or done when he first got the news that Mary was pregnant. There can be little doubt that there was real conflict between Joseph and Mary.

Matthew writes, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). There was no good reason for it, as far as Joseph could tell, no good reason for any of it. Mary and he were pledged to
be married. They were engaged. And now Mary was pregnant. Not by Joseph, mind you. As bad as that situation would have been, they could have coped, hidden the truth for a while or whatever. But no, as bad as that would have been, this was far worse. It was like a nightmare and Joseph kept hoping that he’d wake up.

When Mary told him the news, Joseph tried to take like a man, to take it all in. We can imagine that he acted like most men would act—storming about and swearing to get whoever it was that got Mary pregnant. But Mary wouldn’t talk, except to exclaim something about an angel, and Elizabeth, and the Spirit of the Lord. She wouldn’t tell Joseph who the scoundrel was. No doubt she was protecting the rogue. Of course, the Law gave Joseph the right to have this scoundrel stoned, and Mary, too, if he wished.

There was no good reason for it, as far as Joseph could tell, no good reason for the pregnancy in the first place, or for her protecting the scoundrel. Joseph had a right to be as angry as he wanted. He had every right to have them both stoned!

But Mary was so young, so gentle. Her words: “Joseph, I’m going to have a baby” had shattered his heart. He had wanted to hear those words someday, but not this way, not now. Those words were like a knife to his chest, a terrible hurt that would not go away—Joseph struggled and grappled with his sadness, hurt and inner-conflict.

Again and again he asked Mary the why, who, what, when and where questions. He was hurting. But as he looked upon his fearful and beloved Mary, Joseph began to ask himself one question: What purpose would punishment and stoning serve? It would simply lead to more pain. There had been enough of that. There would be more to come.

Like Joseph, in times of personal conflict and struggle, you and I must prayerfully seek wisdom and patiently wait upon God. Then there is a second truth we can draw from Joseph’s journey that first Advent. When facing a personal crisis, I must seek to extend mercy, even as I depend on God for mercy.

2. Facing crises I must extend mercy, even as I depend on God for mercy

Questions of trust, fidelity and betrayal must have flooded Joseph’s mind. Yet he remains silent in Matthew’s account. Let’s read the 19th verse aloud together: “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly” (Matthew 1:19). Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous or just man. But traditional justice demanded that all the facts be known and that the guilty be punished.

Faced with this deeply personal crisis, Joseph likely prayed for wisdom. It seems that Joseph sensed God telling him to be merciful—to extend mercy to Mary and to depend upon the Lord’s mercy for himself. Given this, Joseph decided to forego with a public self-vindication, and instead endeavored to quietly break off his engagement with Mary. This was no small kindness. In doing this, Joseph not only allowed Mary’s family to protectively and privately close ranks around her, he also opened himself to public rumor and innuendo.

Joseph would have to face the consequences of his unusual decision—extending mercy to Mary and depending upon God for mercy for himself. Joseph would likely lose the respect of many. His reputation would suffer. His livelihood might suffer. His opportunity for a future marriage partner and family might well be jeopardized. To be merciful, as Joseph was, is often very costly. And it must have seemed so for Joseph.

The poet W.H. Auden portrays Joseph during this time of personal crisis. Auden writes, “He could imagine the taunts of his friends: ‘Joseph you have heard, what Mary
says occurred. Yet it may be so, but is it likely? No. Mary may be pure, but Joseph are you sure? How is one to tell? Suppose, for instance... well... .”

Sitting alone in his empty house, sitting in the dark, Joseph hears Mary’s voice again and again and again. She tells him about an angel, about a message from God, about a coming Savior—all with a puzzling assurance, telling him everything, for no good reason. Unless, of course, the reason she told him was because it was all true.

True? Could it really be true? She had never lied to him before. Was she lying now? Angels! The Spirit of the Lord! A holy child—a grace, not a scandalous disgrace!

But there was no proof. Who would believe it? How could he believe it? If only he had some proof, some undeniable, irrefutable evidence of what Mary said was true.

Throughout this time of inner-conflict and personal crisis, Joseph prayed and listened—hoping, perhaps, to hear God’s voice, hoping that the angel Gabriel would appear to him and tell him that all of it was true (or wasn’t true). Just knowing for sure one way or the other would be a blessing, however painful. He listened for the voice of God or the voice of an angel. But what Joseph clearly heard in his mind was the voice of Mary, the gentle voice of the girl he loved. And what Joseph sensed was God’s call to extend mercy and love Mary.

It was then and there that for no good reason, except for God’s love in Joseph’s life that Joseph decided to do the unthinkable. There would be no courts, no trial, no accusation or shameful confession. Vengeance and grudges are so destructive and self-destructive. Joseph determined that he would extend God’s mercy to Mary and in doing so, receive God’s mercy for himself.

So Joseph resolved to quietly divorce Mary and end their engagement. No scenes. No scandal. No stoning. No nothing. There was no good reason for his decision. No one would think him less than a fool for making it. And yet, to be merciful seemed the right thing, the God-thing to do. In facing conflict, we must prayerfully seek wisdom and patiently wait on God. In facing crises, we must extend mercy even as we depend on God for mercy. This leads us to a third and final matter that we can note in our study this morning. When facing conflict and crises we’ll do well to recommit ourselves to God and to the significant persons in our lives.

3. **Facing conflict and crises, I must recommit my life to God and to others**

   It was after this time of inner-conflict and personal crisis that Joseph finally lay down to get some rest. But it wasn’t a very restful night. Joseph had a dream. And in that dream an angel of the Lord came to him and told that everything was true, just as Mary had reported. Let’s read aloud what Matthew writes:

   “But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins’” (Matthew 1:20-21).

   Perhaps when he awoke, it occurred to Joseph to wonder if he had the dream because he really wanted to believe Mary, or if he now was going to believe Mary because he had had the dream. In either case, by the grace and guidance of God, Joseph moved from conflict to crisis to renewed commitment—a commitment to Mary and to the Christ child to whom Mary would soon give birth.
The poet W.H. Auden called Joseph the first Christian because he had to accept the Incarnation without understanding it. During this Advent season as we ponder the wonder and mystery of Christ’s coming, we may be more like Joseph than we realize. There’s so much we don’t understand. Yet, we worship the God of no good reason—the God who loved us into life, who loves us with an everlasting love, the God who has promised to never leave us, who is Immanuel, “God with us.” Matthew writes, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:22).

If there is one Advent truth that we should seek to understand and apply, much like Joseph, we will know God’s blessing as we grow in our commitment to the Lord and to our loved ones. We’ll do well to remember that it was when Joseph determined to end their engagement, that God called him to renewed commitment, faith, hope and love. We read, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24-25).

Of course, Joseph could have declined. He could have said, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Instead he recommitted his life to the Lord God and to his beloved Mary.

You may face a similar challenge today. Are you hearing and heeding the Lord? Are you merciful and loving to the people God has placed in your life? Joseph made some hard choices. Why, how and when those choices come to us is hard to say. But they seem especially apparent in those times when, like Joseph, we worry and wonder about the right thing to do, when the hard choice is really God’s choice for us to make.

Joseph made the hard choice. He kept his commitment to the Lord. He married Mary. He named the child, Jesus or Yeshua, meaning “the one who saves.”

In one sense, the Christ child had already saved Joseph from a shallow sense of justice, forcing Joseph to confess his own sinful thoughts and feelings, to deal with life on a deeper level. He may have also wondered what this God-given name Yeshua meant, perhaps sensing that the salvation his Son would bring would come at a great price.

It also seems that Joseph realized that his most important work in life would be that of being a father to this child. He must do the best he can to love him, teach him, even discipline him. That is why God entrusted His one and only Son to Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth.

Sadly, the gift of a good and godly father is not enjoyed by all of God’s children. Martin Luther often said that he had great trouble addressing God as “father” because his own father had been harsh and abusive. For Luther it was a term that held no warmth, no tenderness, and often brought fear. Some of you may understand that all too well.

Others have fathers known more by their absence than by their presence. No doubt it was a worthy tribute by our Lord Jesus—not only to his Heavenly Father, but in modest measure to his earthly father, Joseph—that Jesus taught his first disciples and each of us to pray the Lord’s Prayer as he did. Jesus addressed his Heavenly Father as a young child speaks lovingly and trustingly to his earthly father, “Abba, Daddy.” Those words seem to capture Joseph’s commitment to his wife, Mary and to their son, Jesus.

During Advent it’s good to take time to remember the Holy Family. It’s also reassuring to realize that every family—even where there seems to be no good reason for
it—will face inevitable conflict and crises. With God’s help, our conflicts and crises can also move us to new commitments to God and to one another.

During Advent some of us will keep this holy family neatly arranged on our mantles or tables, allowing each member of the blessed nativity to carry out their appointed role in their timeless drama.

As always, Mary cradles the baby Jesus. Shepherds kneel and approach the crèche. Winged angels sing glory to God. Wise men offer gifts. Cattle graze, donkey bray. But standing by the manger close, but not so close as to keep the child from our sight, is Joseph. He is quiet. He is hardly noticed. But if we listen and hear his story, he will speak to us about the loving God of grace, mercy and truth. He will remind us of the real reason of this season—of his Son, our Savior.

No More Surprises
Matthew 1:18-25

1. **Facing conflict, I must prayerfully seek wisdom and patiently wait on God**
   “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).

2. **Facing crises, I must extend mercy, even as I depend on God for mercy**
   “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly” (Matthew 1:19).

3. **Facing conflict and crises, I must recommit my life to God and to others**
   “But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins’” (Matthew 1:20-21).
   “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us’’” (Matthew 1:22).
   “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24-25).