

*Luke 2:39-41 When they had accomplished all things that were according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. The child was growing, and was becoming strong in spirit, being filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. His parents went every year to Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover.*

One of the most important things we do in our lives—and one of the most scary—is to raise a child or help raise a child. A mother or father or grandmother or grandfather—actually ANYONE who is in a position to teach or nurture a child—has an awesome responsibility. Many of the characteristics children take on come through us. Not just genetics, but maybe more importantly through our attitudes and actions and the things we teach them verbally.

They may change direction later in life—for the good or the bad—but we literally have the power to determine what path they will use to begin their journey. I think most of us head off into parenthood without thinking what a HUGE responsibility that really is—and I guess that is probably a good thing, because if we REALLY thought about it we might not have children at all.

We feed them and clothe them and make sure they get to school and we pay into a college fund and then we buy them a car and all kinds of things like that.

Still, those responsibilities pale in comparison to what the responsibilities were in ancient times. In ancient times parents and extended family had TOTAL responsibility for their children. Children were with their families moment to moment.

Both the mother and father had the responsibility of feeding and clothing their children, but they were also directly responsible for their children's education—religious and practical.

The father of a boy-child even had the added responsibility of training that son up into a vocation.

I chose a passage today that we don't usually read at Christmas—we usually stop reading several verses before that. The reason I chose it is that this passage gives us a tiny little view into the family God created by choosing Joseph and Mary. We have this little window into how this was all working out—in the moment. We know little about Jesus' childhood but we can see here that God chose well and that Jesus was already on the way to his ministry and his destiny—guided and shaped by his parents.

I talked about Mary's attributes last week—and we will look at some of them again in a moment, but I also want to look at Joseph. Once the plan was in place for Jesus to be come to earth and be born to a human family—the next question had to be “who?” and I don't believe God chose lightly when when he chose Mary and Joseph to raise his son.

This year I have read a lot about Mary and Joseph—in the Scripture and in popular legend and history—and in religious tradition. There is precious little about Mary and even less about Joseph.

Mary was a simple peasant woman in a small town of no real consequence and was probably between 13 and 18 years of age. She spoke Aramaic.

As far as we can know, she wasn't really special in any way you would notice, and yet God chose her to be the mother of Jesus.

Joseph is usually considered to be a widower and much older than Mary. We know he was a carpenter. He was still alive when Jesus was 12 but seems to have died before Jesus began his ministry. We know little else.

On this Sunday, love is the Advent theme. It was this family God chose to love and nurture and raise his son—helping him grow and learn and prepare for what was to come.

If you remember from last week, one thing I mentioned is that one reason Mary was chosen was that she didn't disqualify herself. God was seeking a virgin and she was still a virgin. If she had not, God would not have chosen her for this task. Mary made herself available—she was startled and even troubled by the announcement but she agreed to be chosen. She was willing. Finally, she knew God—and had chosen to learn his word. Her reply to God's calling—often called Mary's Song—contains over 30 partial passages from the Old Testament.

Let me also share some characteristics I see in Joseph that may have helped God to choose him to raise Jesus.

The first characteristic of Joseph is given explicitly in Matthew chapter one. Joseph was a righteous man. Not self-righteous like religious people can be—instead I think of him as humbly-righteous. He was genuinely living right before God—not sinless or blameless or perfect. He knew the law and lived the law to the best of his ability—and clearly he did so to God's satisfaction.

The second is not written in scripture but we find it connected with his righteousness in Matthew. When Mary was found to be pregnant, he was going to put Mary “quietly away” instead of having her charged and potentially stoned to death. Not only did he not want her harmed—he didn't want to add to her embarrassment. So Joseph was gracious—but with a sense of selflessness and kindness thrown in. He was a man of grace.

The third is connected to his righteousness—but a bit different. Joseph not only honored God—he also listened to God in the moment. We all dream—good and bad dreams, though some people say they don't remember dreaming. How hard was it for Joseph to hear and listen based on an angel appearing in his dream? It would be hard for me. I'm imagining that Joseph sought to be close to God and listen to God—and when the time came he could hear—and then act. Characteristic three—he listened for God's voice.

The fourth characteristic is action. Hearing and knowing are not enough. Some time back, I looked up and saw about an 8" oak limb that had snapped off but was hanging over Andrea's car. I was in the middle of something when I saw it and couldn't move it. So I forgot.

When I got inside later I think it was raining and I told Vonna about the car and that I didn't want to move it right then, but she put it on the "do" list and we went to bed. When I woke up, the first thing I thought of was that limb—since we had some thunder and wind overnight I just KNEW her car would be crushed. Well, it wasn't—that was a good thing. But it could have. Because I knew—I saw, Vonna heard, and we failed to act.

That's not how Joseph handled God's marching orders—he acted on what the angel said. He literally saved Mary and Jesus' lives from the letter of Jewish law. Later he did the same thing by heeding God's warning and taking his family and fleeing to Egypt.

So—I laid out some characteristics of Mary last week—and talked briefly about them a while ago. I think between the two of them we can see what caused God to choose to choose them.

And you KNOW I'm not going to miss a chance to list all of those characteristics as we look at some attributes that you and I need as we raise and nurture our children and our grandchildren—and as we help to strengthen children and their families as a church.

In a sense, these are characteristics of our love of God and love of our children.

First—be availability—being ready and willing to be used by God to do the job at hand. Moses' job was to deliver his people. Yours may be changing a diaper. Let me also add that we are to be available to those children. Physically and emotionally. I can tell you that parents and grandparents being emotionally available for children helps them grow up more healthy in mind and spirit.

Second is to remain qualified. Mary was qualified to be the mother of Jesus because she had chosen to remain a virgin. Still, this point is not about virginity—it is about many places in our lives where you and I risk our spiritual future—even God's plan in our lives by our actions.

Third—know God. Seek him and learn his word. Mary did and Joseph did and I believe that is one of the attributes God was seeking in parents for Jesus—in parents for any baby.

Fourth—be righteous. Not perfect but as right before God as we can. That comes from a mind-set and from knowing and practicing the word of God. Seeking and practicing God's will. Not the self-righteousness that seems so prevalent but real righteousness.

Five—be gracious. God's parents are people of grace. Not holding to our rights but gently and carefully considering the well-being and feelings of others when we act.

Six—God sought parents who listened for his voice—and he still does. In a world where there are SO many voices vying for our attention, God wants us to listen for his voice. We hear through our knowledge of his word and we hear by listening to that still-small-voice of the Holy Spirit.

Seven—God seeks parents who act on his word—who DO what God asks and what he calls us to do. To do otherwise leaves God's work undone. In Joseph's case, Jesus and his mother would have been in danger instead of in Egypt where it was safe.

Not one of us parents are Mary and Joseph. But that isn't what God called us to be. He called us to love and to nurture those children in our own lives—be they our children or grandchildren or the children of our church community. It is an awesome job—and it can be a scary job. Still, just as God chose Joseph and Mary—he chose you and me. We don't have to run this course blind—we can follow their lead and we can listen to the Holy Spirit as he seeks to guide us on our journey.