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Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25  
Joseph, Patron Saint of the Road Less Traveled By

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>19</sup>and her husband Joseph, being *a just man* and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19, RSV)

It is natural and right that we should have a *Mary* banner. There she is, that sublime young woman. Many congregations across the world join us in having a *Mary* banner, and well we should, for *Mary* is a most elevated example for us of whole-hearted surrender to the ways of the Lord<sup>1</sup>, captured most beautifully in her answer to the angel Gabriel:

Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.  
(Luke 1:38, KJV)

Yes, and not only this, not only does she teach us self-surrender, but she gives practical, concrete direction to our surrender by pointing us to her son, Jesus. *Mary* is the one who continually teaches us:

His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever *he* saith unto you, do it.  
(John 2:5, KJV)

So, we have a *Mary* banner, and well we should. But we have no *Joseph* banner, and that is often the case with this dear man. He is overlooked. I cannot imagine him complaining about that, for judging by the Bible, he was a not a prideful man, but gentle, compassionate, and righteous. He bears the lovely title, “*Joseph, Protector of the Holy Family,*” and many a man could wish for no higher praise than that. No need for a banner. Just let it be said that we took good care of our family.

St. *Joseph* is a minor man in the story of our Lord, compared to *Mary* or *Peter*, yet he plays an important role in the story. Let me borrow the fine words of Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* to begin praising the man:

The history of his life, says Butler, has not been written *by men*, but his principal actions, through the inspired evangelists, are recorded *by the*

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<sup>1</sup> A lovely review of convictions about *Mary* shared by Catholics and Evangelicals can be found in the recent statement, *Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life*. <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/do-whatever-he-tells-you-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-christian-faith-and-life>

*Holy Ghost Himself...* It was Joseph's trade that Jesus learnt, it was his manner of speech that the boy will have imitated, it was he our Lady herself seemed to invest with full parental rights when she said without qualification, "*Thy father* and I have sought thee sorrowing." (Luke 2:48, KJV, when twelve-year-old Jesus lingered behind in the Temple and debated with the teachers there.)<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, I would like to commend Joseph to you as "the patron saint of the road less traveled by." With this phrase, I am referring to the Robert Frost poem *The Road Not Taken*, especially to the final verse:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

*The Road Not Taken*, Robert Frost (1874–1963)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, Complete Edition, Volume I, January, February, March (P.J. Kenedy & Sons: New York, 1956) page 631, for St. Joseph, March 19.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost (1874–1963). *Mountain Interval*. 1920.

*The Road Not Taken*

TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Oh! The marvelous, various ways of living a human life! Not all paths travel along the ordinary roads. Not all ways of living a human life are the same, but each way asks for faith and integrity.

So it was with St. Joseph. He did not, he *could not have*, expected life to turn out as it did. Some men aim to be no more than devout, but *ordinary* husbands and fathers. Joseph could well have been such a man. But his life did not turn out in the ordinary way.

First off, he had to contend with the appearance of adultery in his young marriage. Until the angel explained the miracle to him, there is no other way he could have conceived it: Mary had been unfaithful to him. But, wonder of wonders, the angel of the Lord explains to Joseph that Mary is still a virgin, still true to him, and Joseph accepts this. No other man on the face of this earth has been asked to walk that particular path -- the beloved is pregnant, not by him, yet still true to him. But Joseph walked that path with grace.

Furthermore, throughout church history and in the faith of Martin Luther and other Reformers, Mary the mother of our Lord is the “*ever* Virgin Mary,” which is full of meaning for Joseph too, though, again, he seems to have walked that path with much grace.

And, then, Joseph was the *stepfather* of Jesus, not the biological father. Stepfathers and stepmothers and foster parents are awfully important in this world, indeed, they are part of the very world for their little ones, but when Joseph was a little boy growing up, he might not have anticipated that life would work out that way for him: that he would be a stepfather.

St. Joseph teaches us that our Maker always calls us to faithfulness and piety, but he does not always call us to an ordinary path in life.

Let me linger a little bit with the point I made about Joseph having to deal with the appearance of adultery. How else could he have interpreted Mary’s pregnancy?

In the piety of those days, betrothal was equivalent to marriage in terms of the solemn vows of faithfulness. If Joseph was going to release Mary and let her go her own way, he needed to do so by way of divorce. It was not a private transaction. Betrothal established legal rights and obligations. So, Joseph resolved to divorce his Mary. Because he was a compassionate man, he resolved to divorce her “quietly.”

The interesting thing about Joseph here was that the Bible credits him with being a “just man”:

<sup>19</sup>and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:19, RSV)

I believe the sense of this saying is that Joseph was a “just man” not *in spite of* his determination to divorce Mary, but *because of* his determination to do so. Joseph was a righteous and faithful man, whose example could be commended to others, because he was willing to set aside the turmoil of emotions at war in his heart, and to stand up for holy marriage. Whatever his heart said, he was willing to go ahead

and divorce a wife he could only understand as having been untrue to him. It might have broken Joseph's heart to divorce Mary, but he *feared* not to. For the sake of his soul, he feared to fail to divorce his wife.

It was precisely this sense of faithful duty that the angel addresses:

<sup>20</sup>But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, *do not fear* to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; (Matthew 1:20, RSV)

And Joseph, God bless him! accepts this. I bet he accepted this strange, unprecedented, angelic message with joy, and goes ahead and takes his Mary for his wife.

One way or another, the appearance of adultery created a crisis in the life of young Joseph. He was maybe nineteen years old, dealing with the most heartrending matters. The appearance of adultery created a crisis for him because adultery always does so. Adultery is awful!

The good Lord did not give us marriage that it should be an occasion for heartbreak and betrayal, but rather than we could face each day's morning sun with gratitude in our hearts for our beloved -- gratitude for the passing years in which we were true to each other, gratitude that we are able to face what life brings, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, meaning to face it together and to love and cherish each other.

In Martin Luther's catechism, he tends to link the Fourth Commandment -- Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother -- to the first three Commandments. That's because he thinks the important thing about parents is that they teach their children to love the Lord. Then, Luther thinks of the remaining Commandments as being directed chiefly toward our neighbor. He says that these remaining commandments all forbid us to hurt our neighbor. The first of these -- the commandment against murder -- forbids us to hurt our neighbor by taking our neighbor's life. But the Commandment right after that is equally solemn: No adultery! Do not hurt your neighbor by breaking your neighbor's heart.<sup>4</sup>

Life is long, and if in the course of life you should someday find yourself tempted toward adultery, I appeal to you, to turn it down. Do not yield.

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<sup>4</sup> "You shall not commit adultery." The following commandments are easily understood from the preceding one. They all teach us to guard against harming our neighbor in any way. They are admirably arranged. First they deal with our neighbor's person. Then they proceed to the person nearest and dearest to him, namely, his wife, who is one flesh and blood with him.<sup>7</sup> In no possession of his can we inflict a greater injury upon him. Therefore, it is explicitly forbidden here to dishonor his wife.<sup>201</sup> ... Thus God by his commandment wants every husband or wife guarded and protected from any trespass. (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, The Sixth Commandment.)

And if you are an adulterer, then stop, confess your sin, receive absolution, and enter whole-heartedly upon the penitential life. And if your partner asks you why, then be absolutely honest, for you must try to save the soul of that one too. Answer like this: “I have sinned. I have sinned against God’s holy commandment, against holy marriage, against your spouse, against my spouse, against our children, against you, and against my own self, together with my hopes for the future. I mean henceforth to live a life of repentance.”

Our Lord Jesus hated divorce, yet hated unfaithfulness even more. And so in his teaching against divorce, he makes an exception for unfaithfulness:

But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of unchastity*, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:32, NRSV, also 19:9)

So serious is marriage unfaithfulness. Christ never shames the Church so, and asks that we not shame one another through adultery.

Yet if we fall, there is forgiveness. Aye, and there is forgiveness in the name of the very One who taught faithfulness. For it was Jesus himself, who counted unrepentant adultery as justifying divorce, who nonetheless said the sweet words to the woman caught in adultery:

And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (John 8:11, KJV)

This is ever the word from Jesus to sinners, to us sinners: Neither do I condemn them: go, and sin no more. It is the old teaching of the Church: With the Lord, there is forgiveness of sins. Yea, though our sins should be dreadful, with the Lord we have the chance for confession, absolution, and amendment of life going forward:

<sup>18</sup>Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18, KJV)

Back now to St. Joseph. As it turned out in its wonderful way, Joseph did not have to deal with adultery, for he believed the angel that Mary had been true to him. Still, the man lived a life that was out of the ordinary, and he lived it with grace. Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* is right. Twelve years later, when Mary finds her son in the Temple debating with the teachers there, she accords Joseph full parental rights, saying to her son, “*Thy father* and I have sought thee sorrowing...” As for the Bible, it raises no complaint about the identity of Jesus when the people, astonished by his preaching, wonder about “the carpenter’s son”:

<sup>53</sup>And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, <sup>54</sup>and coming to his own country he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? <sup>55</sup>Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? (Matthew 13:53-54, RSV)

And when all was said and done, I like to think that Jesus thought back on Joseph with gratitude and affection.

Jesus wept, the Bible says. He wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He wept at the misery of death that afflicts humanity. And it might well have been with Jesus then as it with us at the graveside: We are sad not only because of the one who has just died, but sad also to remember the good people we have known throughout our lives who “rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which none can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh.”<sup>5</sup>

Bible scholars note that Joseph was not present at the crucifixion of our Lord. He is not there at the side of Mary, and so they suspect that by the time of our Lord’s death, Joseph has already died. But if so, I can well imagine Jesus weeping for this good man, his earthly father, patron saint of those whose life followed the road less traveled by, yet who lived good and faithful lives anyway, to the protection of his holy family, to the benefit of his neighbors, and to the glory of God, to whom belongs the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> From the bidding prayer for *Nine Lessons and Carols*,  
<http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/files/services/festival-nine-lessons-2010.pdf>