

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas  
January 4, 2009  
The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square  
The Rev. Diana Carroll

*In the name of God, the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.*

I may be the only one here who thought of this, but when I listen to today's gospel reading, I'm reminded of a song from "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." The one that repeats the words "Poor, poor Joseph" over and over. I know it's the wrong Joseph, but still, you kind of have to feel bad for the guy. First, he discovers his fiancée is pregnant, and not by him. Then angels start popping up in his dreams with messages from God, and then it turns out that this child (which is not his) has powerful enemies who want to kill him.

I sometimes think Joseph doesn't get quite enough credit for the part he plays in the story. There is so much focus on Mary and her choice to say yes to God. But Joseph made a choice too. He didn't have to take responsibility for Mary and her child. He could have sent her away quietly, as he was planning to do. Instead, he chose to accept Mary, and Jesus along with her, to take them as his family and care for them. It meant leaving his home and going to live as a refugee in a foreign country. It meant starting over yet again in Nazareth, because they couldn't go back to Bethlehem. Joseph was ultimately willing to uproot his entire life in order to protect the family he had chosen as his own.

The great theologians tell us that all human love originates in divine love. And so in Joseph's love for his adopted child, we see a reflection of God's love for each one of us. At Christmastime, we often focus on Jesus as the beloved child of God. But all too easily, we forget that in Jesus, we have also become God's beloved children. In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul writes that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world" and "destined us for adoption as God's children."

Now, I know there may be some Calvinists among us, so I am not going to get into the implications that these verses might have for a doctrine of predestination. To me, the main thing is this: God chose us. Before we even had the power to make choices, God chose to forge a new relationship with us in Jesus Christ. One of the prayers we used on Christmas Day says, "Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by the Holy Spirit." God has adopted us, just as Joseph adopted Jesus. We have been chosen. We have been made God's children. We belong to the family of God.

Most of us recognize that there is a difference between the family relationships that we choose and those that we don't choose. When I was growing up, my extended family on the Carroll side frequently played Trivial Pursuit at family gatherings. The two teams were always the same: "Carrolls by choice" against "Carrolls by accident." The "Carrolls by choice" were those who had chosen to become Carrolls by marrying into the family, and the "Carrolls by accident" were those who had simply been born into the family. It was a silly distinction in some ways, but it also reminded us subtly that being a family depended as much on choice as it did on chance.

There are other kinds of “family by choice,” of course. Most of us have people in our lives who aren’t related to us at all, yet who we think of as family anyway. Like my brother’s godfather, who has always been “Uncle Jim” to me. I’d imagine that in one way or another, every one of us here has experienced a mix of “family by choice” and “family by accident” over the course of our lives. Yet there is something very special and unique about the particular choice that is made in adoption: The choice to form a new relationship as parent and child. It is not necessarily an easy choice. One way or another, there is almost always some pain involved. And yet in the choice to adopt, we see reflected the choice that God makes with us. The choice for inclusion. The choice for belonging.

In the church where I grew up, there was a couple named Robert and Kristin, who had known each other when they were much younger but had lost touch over the years. They reconnected when they both moved to our town and started attending our church. By then, both of them had been married and divorced, and they each had a daughter from their first marriage. Robert’s ex-wife was still very present in his daughter’s life, but Kristin’s ex-husband had been out of the picture for years. Her daughter, Susan, had barely known her father.

Not long after coming to our church, Robert and Kristin got married. They raised their two daughters together and eventually had a son as well. I can still picture their photograph in the church photo directory, with their names listed underneath. All of them had the same last name – except for Susan. She still had her father’s last name, and so had to be listed separately. To me, it was always a poignant reminder of the somewhat bumpy road by which this family had come to be together. And it was also a reminder of the ways in which Susan was still separated, still just a little bit removed from the rest of the family, not knowing who her father was or where he was.

A few years after the wedding, the family decided that it was time for Robert to legally adopt Susan as his daughter. The proper notices were given, appropriate attempts were made to locate her birth father, and when all the papers were signed, Susan Jackson became Susan Jones. In some ways, nothing much had changed. After all, they had already been a family for years. And in other ways, everything had changed. A new relationship had been formed, one that Robert and Susan had both chosen, one that gave Susan a place of belonging in the family that she hadn’t known before.

When Robert adopted Susan, the family wanted to recognize this new relationship in the context of a worship service. So they asked to use a short service from the prayer book called “A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child.” Those of you who were here on Christmas Day heard me talk about it a little already: how it is often overlooked but contains some of the most beautiful prayers about family life. On a Sunday morning, just before the passing of the peace, the Jones family stood before the congregation, and the priest called on the gathered community “to witness the inauguration of this new relationship.”

It was very like a marriage ceremony in some ways. The priest asked Robert, “Robert, do you take this child for your own?” and he answered, “I do.” And then, because Susan was old enough to answer for herself, the priest asked her, “Do you take this man as your father?” and she said, “I do.” Then the priest took Susan’s hand and gave her to Robert with these words: “As God has made us his children by adoption and grace, may you receive Susan as your own daughter.” And just like that, Susan became Robert’s child.

That day, that ceremony, was a window that gave us a glimpse into the love that God has for all of us. But just like Joseph when he chose to become a father to Jesus, I’m sure that Robert and Susan had no idea what they were getting into. We can never really know at the outset what any [chosen] relationship has in store for us. That includes our relationship with God. Which is why Paul prayed for the Ephesians that they might receive “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” as they came to know God, that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened, and that they might know the hope to which they had been called. Being chosen and adopted by God is only the beginning. We spend our whole lives discovering how this new relationship with God will unfold, finding out the riches of our inheritance among the saints, learning what it means to be the beloved children of God.

Joseph chose Jesus. Robert chose Susan. God chose us. Who will we choose?

Amen.