This Sunday after Christmas Day, we are winding down the Christmas celebrations and looking forward to the new year. Our scripture this week tells the story of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus’ flight to Egypt to escape the threat of Herod. Herod the Great was a nasty character who killed members of his own family, even his wife, to secure his position. He was a man who gained his position and held it by violence. It is not out of character that he would try to kill this baby who was foretold by the wise men to be the new king. But God sends a message to Joseph in a dream and Joseph takes Mary and Joseph to safety in Egypt. And when Herod slaughters the babies of Bethlehem, Jesus is not among them.

I was struck with the character of Joseph in this story. In our celebrations of the Christmas story Joseph is usually in the background, a supporting character to Mary and the baby Jesus. As I decided to build the worship service around Joseph, I was struck by the lack of focus on his part in the story. In the hymnal, there are many songs about Mary but there are no songs about Joseph the father of Jesus. He is literally an unsung hero.

Joseph was a man of great faith and a dream catcher. The story couldn’t have happened without him. It would have ended in Bethlehem with the death of the infant Jesus. God needed Joseph as much as he needed Mary. God didn’t just choose Mary. God chose Joseph, too. God needed a couple that was willing and faithful, and a husband that was able to listen. Maybe God chose Mary in part because she was betrothed to Joseph.

Joseph was willing to be a loving husband to Mary and loving father to the baby. He named Jesus and claimed him, giving Jesus the connection to David’s lineage. Joseph was open
to God’s guidance through dreams and angels. Joseph was a visionary, sensitive and perceptive. It has been said that God needed Joseph’s faithfulness as much as he needed Mary’s womb.

Joseph paid attention to his dreams and acted on them. He has four dreams in which God speaks to him, three of which are in this short passage. The first dream is the one in which God urges Joseph to accept Mary and believe that she is telling the truth about the baby. In this passage, Joseph has a second dream warning him to fly to Egypt because Herod wants to kill the baby. After a time in Egypt, he has a third dream telling him that Herod is dead and they can go back. Finally, Joseph is warned in a fourth dream that he should not go back to Judea because Herod’s son, Archelaus, is ruling there, so he returns with his family to Nazareth in Galilee. Joseph is obedient. His actions mirror the angels commands literally. The angel tells Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.” So “Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.” Because of Joseph, Jesus was kept safe and multiple prophecies about him were fulfilled.

In Matthew’s Gospel, there is no further mention of Joseph. In Luke’s gospel, the last mention of him is about his concern when the 12 year old Jesus is missing. We never find out what happened to Joseph. But although he’s a minor character, he is vital to Jesus’ story. Compared to Joseph, our stories are even more minor in the greater story of the Good News of Jesus. But as small our part may be, it’s still an important part of the story. In this troubled world, children are still being slaughtered, people are still oppressed. There are immigrant families fleeing persecution. There are ways in which the Gospel message must be protected, cherished, and carried. To where is God calling us? How is God leading us to bear the Christ-child in these days? Are we listening for God’s leading? And are we ready, like Joseph, to follow that leading boldly and faithfully? May it be so. Amen.