

**Just “Joe:” A Christmas Fable**  
*by Tom Wilkinson, Vice President*  
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It happened last year during the 7:00 PM Christmas Eve service at First United Methodist Church at the corner of Main Street and First Avenue. The sanctuary was packed, the choir had just finished a medley of Christmas carols, and Pastor Wally Phillips was about five paragraphs into his sermon when a stranger, attired in a Christmas sweater, wandered down the center aisle of the church, whistling “Away in a Manger.” Pastor Phillips, while a little irritated, still welcomed the slightly disoriented man to the worship service. “Hello,” he said.

“Oh, hi there,” said the stranger

“May I help you?” inquired the pastor.

“Sure, I guess,” replied the stranger nonchalantly as he walked up the three steps to the chancel.

Pastor Phillips, growing more irritated with the man, asked, “Do you know where you are?”

“Not exactly,” was the reply, “but it sure looks nice in here. Look at all these people, I haven’t seen some of you since last year, may have been Easter. What is it, a party?”

“Sort of,” replied the pastor, warily, as climbed down from the pulpit.

“Nice, very nice. Mind if I stay awhile?”

Pastor Phillips, somewhat relieved, said, “We’d love to have you stay.”

“What’s the occasion?” asked the stranger.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” deadpanned Pastor Phillips.

“Now I remember. That’s why he sent me. That’s why I’m here.”

Growing more incredulous by the minute, the pastor asked, “Who sent you?”

“Why, my boy of course.”

“And you are?”

“I’m Joe, but you probably know me better as Joseph,” said the man.

“Joseph what?” inquired the exasperated pastor who had now completely lost control of the service.

“Nothing. Just Joe.”

“No last name?”

“No last name.”

“You mean, like Cher, or ‘W’ or Madonna?”

“Something like that, yeah, but we’re a little sensitive about Madonna, if you know what I mean. Anyway, that’s why I’m here. To fill in the blanks a little bit. Equal time, that sort of thing. There’s some things that got left out of the story.”

By now one of the members of the board of trustees was about to shoo the man out the side door, but Pastor Phillips waved him off and asked, “And what story would that be?”

“The one you’re telling tonight! Now if you don’t mind, could I get on with it?”

Pastor Phillips knew the sermon he had been working on and tweaking for two weeks was a lost cause, and wearily relented, “Be our guest.”

Joe lit up like a Christmas tree. “Be our guest! Be our guest. Thank you. I wish I’d heard that the first time, back in Bethlehem, from the innkeeper. Not that he was a bad guy, don’t get me wrong. He gets a bum rap. He was in a bind, had all those paying customers, a no-vacancy sign out front, but we had to try. He did what he could. Got the village midwife to help with the birth. She was a godsend. Literally.”

“Now, come on, who are you, really?” asked a woman in the front pew.

Joe replied, “Who *am* I? I’m on the cover of your bulletin tonight. I bet most of you have a little statue of me somewhere around the house this time of year. Only I’m usually the guy in the back corner, in the shadows, out of the spotlight. The original second banana.”

“Somehow I thought you’d look different,” said an incredulous Pastor Phillips.

“Oh, you mean the clothes. I have found that it works better to come dressed like the people I’m going to meet. One year, up in Chicago, I showed up in my ‘traditional’ costume. They thought I was there for the living nativity. Didn’t even get to play myself. Outside. Did I mention it was in Chicago? In December. It can get very drafty under those robes, if you know what I mean.”

“You look pretty well-fed for a Galilean peasant,” said the coordinator of the Meals on Wheels program.

“My wife, she’s a great cook. Does wonders with goat. And I was pretty successful. Started out as a carpenter, ended up owning my own contracting business. Tried to get him to go into the family business, take over for me when I hung up the ol’ tool belt. But he had other ideas.” Joe paused. “Anyway, I guess you could say he actually *did* go into the family business.” He pointed skyward.

“What was it really like?” asked the organist.

The sanctuary fell silent. Joe said, “It was very tough when she told me she was pregnant. I knew I wasn’t the father. It really hurt because I really, really loved her. Still do. I didn’t know how she could do that to me. I was older than she was. Thought I might never get married, be happy, have a family. But I decided to sleep on it, and in the morning, I knew it was going to be okay. I don’t know whether it was an angel or God talking to me in a dream, doesn’t matter, all I know is that when I woke up I knew in my heart that things were going to work out. And when I held that little baby that night in the stable, I fell in love again, right then and there.

“Then the shepherds showed up. What a piece of work they were. Good guys. Working guys, like me. I thought they’d been taking a nip or two, stories about singing angels and all that. Then the three ‘intellectuals’ from some fancy Ivy League type place showed up. I knew we were in for quite a ride.

“But you know what I really learned? That being a father is a lot more than biology. It’s about being there for your kids, whether they’ve got your genes or not. I couldn’t love anyone any more than I loved him.”

Pastor Phillips said, “We don’t hear much about you after that time in Jerusalem when he stayed behind after Passover and you found him in the temple with the rabbis. You kind of disappear from the story”

“Longest three days of my life,” he said. “But you’re right about that. I didn’t live long enough to see it all happen. His mother did. It was very hard on her. We’re both still amazed at how it turned out.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “Wow, look at the time. I gotta run, got a big birthday party tomorrow. It’s tough for a kid when your birthday’s on Christmas. Anyway, thanks for carrying on with the work. One thing he said, ‘the poor will always be with you.’ Unfortunately he was right. There’s still a lot of hurt in the world. War, poverty, hunger. Some things just don’t seem to change. But his message was that there’s hope. That there’s room at the table for everybody. He didn’t eat with sinners just because the food was good. That was for you too. So don’t be afraid to mix it up with people who are different. And don’t do it just between Thanksgiving and Christmas either. Oh, and don’t forget to share what you’ve got. You know that ‘WWJD’ stuff? Think about that the next time the offering plate goes by. Doesn’t matter whether you’re rich or poor. That’s what he wants from you. To share whatever you’ve got.”

Someone in the choir began to hum “Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine.”

On his way out the door Joe turned and said, “Remember the message. Keep it going. Pass it on. Peace on earth. Good will to everybody. Merry Christmas.”

And he was gone.

The Board and Staff of the Foundation wish everyone a blessed Christmas season and a happy new year. As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to comprehensive Christian stewardship. For more information please call, click or write us at 1-866-363-9673 toll-free; [www.fumf.org](http://www.fumf.org); or PO Box 3549, Lakeland, FL 33802.