The Story of Joseph

December 24, 1983, 11:00 p.m. Elizabeth Oettinger

At the Louvre Museum in Paris, at the end of a long and particularly ill-lit corridor, there is a most extraordinary painting. It was painted in the late seventeenth century in Italy by an unknown artist, and its title is "Unto us a son is given." After room upon room of contemplative madonnas, the painting is startling in its difference, for it depicts, not a woman, but the face of a very young man gazing down with a look of absolute wonder at the child in his arms. Joseph, the father. He was there too in Bethlehem, you know, along with the mother and the baby and the animals. But he always gets pushed aside. Joseph is an embarrassment really. With all the business about the virgin birth and this child being the son of God, there's not a nice, neat niche to put Joseph into. Yet he was there; and if this child was God's son by birth, He was Joseph's by nurture and by faith. I think of all the paintings and sermons and music dedicated to the mother and the child; what their existence means; what they tell us about God's love. The only stories about Joseph are those made up over time by the church to underline the virgin birth: that Joseph was an old man, that Joseph was a eunuch, that Joseph was an avowed mystic and celibate who wanted nothing to do with Mary and the child anyway. Poor Joseph, how we have maligned him. The unknown artist who painted "unto us a son is given" understood that, and I admire his courage in depicting Joseph as he more likely was: a young man, an adolescent, not given to visions or consecrated celibacy, a young man who found within himself faith enough and love enough to accept the child that Mary bore and to make that child his.

Of all the characters of the nativity story, I am most profoundly moved by the man Joseph, because I believe that of all the leaps of faith which the story requires, the level of trust called forth from all the characters who participated in that event in Bethlehem, the faith and trust of Joseph were the longest and boldest leap of all.

Mary's role was not easy. She was told that she would have a child through the power of the Holy Spirit, and she believed. But in time her belief changed to knowledge. She could see her body change; feel the baby move; and she knew that what the angel told her was true. Joseph, on the other hand, well, it takes a different kind of faith to believe your fiancee when she tells you that she's pregnant and an angel did it. No matter what sort of dreams you have about angel visitations, it's still a hard story to swallow. And the proof of the story never comes: If you believe it, if you decide to trust, then forever after, you live still only with that faith and that trust.

Joseph was a sucker. Let's face it. He believed a story that probably not one person in this room would ever even consider. By all objective measures, by the standards of wisdom, and science, and just plain common sense, Joseph acted very foolishly in trusting Mary's story, and even more foolishly in accepting the child and raising him as his own. Joseph, the fool; I never cease to be moved by him because whatever the mother and the baby represent to us and for us, to me Joseph stands as

an example, a beacon, a light in the darkness, showing us and all Christians that what we are called to do in a world of darkness and brokenness and human wisdom is to say yes to the foolishness of our God, to answer God's foolishness with a loving and faithful foolishness of our own.

Now you might ask why I would say that God is foolish, and I would answer that there is ample proof all around us. The proof extends from the form and visage of a rhinosceros to the meaning of grace; it begins with a savior born of questionable parentage in a dirty stable and extends through a messiah hanging dead on a cross. Do you call that smart? Do you think that is wisdom? Any intelligent human strategist could tell you that kings to have authority must be born in castles, and freedom fighters and messiahs need to face the world with swords and armies in order to conquer the oppressers. No wise man or woman would dare to give us the awful weakness of Christmas, a helpless child in a manger; no seer or visionary would imagine a crucified and risen Lord, the victory of defeat. God is not wise as we are wise, but by faith we believe, as the Apostle Paul tells us, "That the foolishness of God is wiser than human beings, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

There are two things that I would have you ponder this Christmas: The first is this profound and eternal foolishness of our God. It is this foolishness which brings us mountains and rivers, the stars in their complex and invisible order, butterflies and bullfrogs, the taste of a new Fall apple and the feel of Spring grass underfoot. It is the foolishness of God which gives us human beings in all shapes, sizes and colors, with all their diveristy of gifts and weaknesses, this same foolishness which brings us hope out of despair and the cycle of birth and rebirth beyond death. I ask you this Christmas as you consider the baby in a manger to allow yourself to be hunbled by the profound and awesome grandeur of the foolishness of our God, to let your hearts rejoice and be glad, and to sing songs of praise and adoration.

But beyond just trying to comprehend and appreciate God's folly beyond wisdom, I would ask you this Christmas night to respond to it. Like Joseph. To find in yourself a way of saying Yes. Like Joseph. To dare to be foolish yourself, a measure of your love and faithfulness. We are all so bound by our vision of what is wise and prudent and sensible, and yet no where, not one place in scripture do I find God exhorting us to common sense, to street wisdom, to sensible judgments. Instead God calls us to be foolish even as God is foolish: to love our enemies, to give all that we have, to accept a baby in a manger, born of a virgin as our Lord. Think for a moment of where human wisdom has gotten us: a world where rich and poor, black and white, Moslem and Christian, east and west are in conflict; a world of dwindling natural resources, and increasing protectionism; a world filled with too much pain and loneliness and fractured relationships, a world shadowed by the fear of nuclear weapons and a dooms-day clock pointing to three minutes of midnight. All this we have wrought through our wisdom; and many who are wise among us now tell us that there is no turning back that we are trapped in a downward spiral from which we cannot extricate ourselves.

How foolish to think that a baby in a manger can change all that; how foolish to believe that we can yet bring light out of darkness, and peace out of conflict, unity out of division, and love where there was once only hatred. But think of Joseph, and believe it. Think of the loving foolishness of our God, and believe it. Look within yourself to the hope which cries out this Christmas night, yearning for a new day, and believe it.

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." With angels and wisemen and all the company of heaven and earth, I bring you this night a greeting of peace on earth and good will to all people everywhere. Be foolish. Believe it.