

“Joses of Nazareth” / Mark 6:1-6 / 8 July 2012

Hi. I’m just Joses. No, not “Jesus,” Joses. Maybe you’ve heard of me? Joses of Nazareth, lesser-known little brother of Jesus of Nazareth? Does the name ring a bell? Oh. Well, here I am, right here in the Book of Mark. You just zipped past my name, and you didn’t even notice it. That’s okay. No biggie. To tell the truth, I’m kind of used to living in my older brother’s shadow. When your brother is the famed Jesus of Nazareth, well, you end up getting skipped over...a lot.

Did you even know that Jesus had brothers? Here we are, in the Book of Mark—the least whimsical book of the New Testament, chapter six, verse three: Jesus’ brothers and sisters. There were five of us boys: Jesus, then James, then me (Joses; do you think I have “middle child syndrome”?). Then there was Judas (not the famous Judas, of course) and then Simon (not the famous Simon, either). If you think it’s tough being one of Jesus’ brothers, just try being one of Jesus’ sisters! Their names don’t even make it into the book. Oh, but I’m not bitter. We lived a quiet life. We were country people, craftsmen, and day laborers. There’s not much fame in our family, except for Jesus...and mom. We’re just regular folks. You know what’s funny? If you go to Israel today, you might bump into some of our descendants, the great-grandnephews and nieces of Jesus! All of them Jews, I’m proud to say!

Do you want to know a secret? I don’t know if I should tell you. Ah, what the heck, why not? I mean, it’s not like you can travel back in time to the First Century and get me in trouble for it, right? And most folks in your 21<sup>st</sup> Century don’t even know that I exist! I’ll tell you my secret: I can’t get used to the way you people are always calling my brother “Lord” and “Savior.” There! I said it! What’s so special about Jesus? Don’t get me wrong. I love him. He’s my big brother. And a little brother always looks up to his older brother. But Jesus, the Son of God, really? C’mon.

My four brothers and me, we ran the carpentry shop after our dad died young. It was a good trade. But when our oldest brother hit thirty, he laid down his saw and hammer. He wandered off to become a roaming preacher. I gotta tell you, it seemed like craziness to us. I’d known the guy all my life. He’s my brother. Those first thirty years of his life, those years the Bible doesn’t talk about, I was there for those! I saw what went on, and let me tell you: he was a carpenter, just a carpenter. He was a great guy, but a rabbi? A prophet? The Son of God? We thought he was crazy when he left the business and started preaching. Thirty is too old for a midlife crisis. C’mon, people in our day only get about forty-five years of life. Have your midlife crisis at twenty-two and a half! You don’t make a career switch at the wizened old age of thirty. He needed to get married, have some kids already. But Jesus up and left us; he went off to preach.

You wanna know another secret...a *family* secret? We tried to stop him. If you don’t believe me, you can read about it in Mark 3:31-35. We tried to keep Jesus from going off the deep end. Our mom, Mary, and my brothers, and me, we heard that he was railing against the priests and rulers, drawing big crowds, saying things that could get a guy crucified around these parts. So we went into town to get him and bring him back home. You know what Jesus did? He disowned us. My own brother! He said, and I quote, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God, that person is my mother, and brother, and sister.” In other words, James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon, and Mary; you won’t follow me, so you’re not my family anymore. My followers are my family now. That hurt. That really hurt.

But how were we gonna be his followers? We knew too much about him. We remember the first girl he had a crush on. We know how he snores. It’s just that you always

expect wisdom and greatness to come from faraway. I don't have to tell you that! It's just that you expect your heroes to be...heroes! People without flaw and blemish. It's just that you never expect the people closest to you to be vehicles of grace in your life, agents of blessing. With family and old friends, relationships are complicated by intimate personal histories, the memories of words once spoken, deeds once done. You don't expect, or even want, them to be the answer to your problems. Who can believe that, all too often, God comes to you not in heroes, but in people you know? All too often, God reaches out to you through the actions and the words of the very folks you already have all figured out. God offers wisdom, and healing, and strength, and grace by means of the ordinary, imperfect people in your life. And, like us folks in Nazareth, you run the risk of missing out on those things you when you refuse to receive them from the hands of those unextraordinary, unexceptional, everyday people you know.

Don't get me wrong; I'm aware that we all need familiar people in our lives. Maybe you've been seeing all the reports in the newspapers lately about the General Assembly of Presbyterian Church, the highest governing body of the denomination, which has been meeting here in Pittsburgh this past week. [What's that? You want to know if my brother came to town for General Assembly? Oh, my no, he's not a Presbyterian.] Anyhow, the General Assembly meets every two years to decide policy for the church. It's like a very big, very volatile, very long presbytery meeting. This year, as always, they got into some terribly controversial stuff: the immigration debate, climate change, same sex marriage, the question of whether the church should invest its portfolios in corporations that are making money off the Israeli / Palestinian conflict. As I looked on at some of the debating that took place, it occurred to me that in a multitude of 4,000 people, you just naturally scan the crowd for a face you know. Any face! You listen to the people at the microphone in hopes of hearing an opinion similar to your own. In a crowd that big, you look for familiarity, connections, any shred of relationship.

I don't know which is worse, the kind of disrespect that we feel for people we don't know and understand...or the kind that we feel for people we know and understand all too well. A new mother watched in horror as her sweet baby discovered the fun of messy play, specifically the messy play that ensues when a baby's diaper comes unfastened. That mother looked at me, pointed at the baby and said, "How am I ever going to take this person seriously?" She went on to say, "I mean, she'll grow up, and she'll speak like an adult someday. But anytime she tries to say anything intelligent or serious, my mind will return to this moment, when her greatest joy was to smear herself with that." Of course, now that child is seven years old, and her mother doesn't truly think about the diaper incident very often. The precocious child will say to her mother, "You know, these deviled eggs need more horseradish and salt," and her mother wisely follows the kid's culinary advice. It's because we're usually able to identify the real strengths that a loved one—even a child—has to offer. And as that person grows into those strengths, we begin to sense their unique giftedness for the life of the world, their callings. With time, even the most familiar person can astound us with things we never knew, and we'll come to accept that, because in our love, we never doubted their capacity to understand, say, deviled eggs, or rocket science, or small engine repair, or optometry.

Now, of course, I'm just Joses, "Joses of Nazareth," what do I know about your 21<sup>st</sup> Century? But I think it's safe to say: no superheroes are coming to the rescue. I would think the world would be tired of superheroes by now. Superman, Spiderman, Batman: how seriously can you take a guy who dresses in capes? (Black robes, however, are a different

matter.) Every time Hollywood gives us another superhero movie or comic book remake, I say to myself, “Surely this will be the last time we see a movie about the Incredible Hulk. Surely this well has run dry. Surely no one out there is going to watch another film about the world being rescued from Lex Luthor.” Surely in a world where North Korea and Iran possess nuclear capabilities, surely in a world where fundamentalist terrorists are willing to die for their cause, surely we’re not still watching movies where the future of the planet is threatened by the likes of the Joker, the Riddler, the Penguin? But the fact is, we’ll never stop watching superhero movies until we stop yearning for a superhero, some noble, powerful stranger who comes to save the day: some great political figure who will restore our safety and prosperity, some great religious leader who will restore our church, some great warrior who will put an end to terrorism and the quagmire in Afghanistan. We secretly hope for a Superman. Because Mother Theresa, George Washington, and General MacArthur, they’re all long gone with no one to fill their shoes. Even Norman Schwarzkopf is retired. There are no superheroes, just ordinary people who stepped up as best they could when circumstances came to call. There never have been superheroes, and the world just keeps on rolling along without them.

In reality, we don’t need superheroes. We mostly just need people who know us and love us all the same, people who call us back to ourselves. President Obama told the story several years ago about a busy day he when he was a senator running for the White House. There were campaigns in battle ground states, interviews with serious new journals, real matters of policy and life and death stuff, not a moment to rest. And into the middle of just such a day, his wife Michelle called him, asked how his day was, listened politely as he complained about this political thing of that. Then when he was done speaking, the line grew quiet, and Michelle Obama spoke: “We got ants in the kitchen.” It’s good that even the powerful, even the famous, have those people to ground them, people who know things they didn’t read in the papers, people who know whether they put the cap back on the toothpaste. In fact, most of us live a variety of lives: public lives, private lives, visible lives, and invisible. We have the lives we live when everyone’s looking and other lives when we’re alone. We all need someone who knows the sides of us that we might not want published; otherwise, we run the risk of forgetting who we are and where we’re from.

We don’t get Supermen. We don’t need them. Grace and love are spoken into our lives each day. Wisdom and strength, healing and courage; they all come to us in such unassuming disguises that we often miss them. Life’s best gifts come to us by means of painfully ordinary people. Have you ever missed out on God’s gift to you because the person who carried it was all too familiar: a spouse, a parent, a child, an old friend, a sibling, a person you sat beside in church for decades? I bet you have. These common, imperfect folks are God’s voice to us, directing us, despite their faults, failures, and wrongdoings. We’ve listened to some of them snoring beside us every night for years; our illusions about their saintliness are long gone. They don’t look like anything special or sacred...but they are! And you! You are one of them: someone’s unlikely saint. As the saying goes, “To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world.” Never underestimate your power to be God’s agent of wholeness and healing to the world. ~Ah, but what do I know. I’m just Joses, Joses of Nazareth. I can’t believe how you folks talk about my brother, Jesus. Nice head of hair like mine; I should have been the famous one. Amen.