

Joseph and His Chosen Son
Matthew 1: 18-25
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“Now the birth of Jesus took place this way.” So begins Matthew’s story about how God came into the world in fleshly form and through human kind. For some the story is received as the literal truth, for others, it is history told as metaphor, metaphor being the only possible way to express the mysterious and mystical truth of the enfleshed presence of God entering into our human history. For some the birth happened much like any other birth; a moment in time, a woman in pain, a baby swaddled in blankets. For others the birthing is not yet complete, but part of an ongoing process of Christ ushering into the world and into our lives, the fulfilled reign of God. From this second perspective Advent has lasted 2000 years and the spirit of anticipation will continue until we are fully and finally able to let the birthing of God’s world be complete.

In this story, a story that spans 2000 years and more, we continue to be part of the birth narrative. We are characters in the crèche scene, each one of us with a role to play. Today, we stand beside Joseph and we consider his part in this everlasting story of the birth of hope, peace, joy and love.

Joseph, poor Joseph. He is often cast as a silent character, as a dreamer, perhaps a bit of a loser, Clark Kent to Mary's spunky Lois Lane. But Joseph was a much more complex man than often meets the eye. As a righteous, law-abiding man, he knew all the rules - those laws of the legal code and those informal rules of community living. The book of Deuteronomy leaves little doubt as to the fate of women who have had sexual relations with someone other than their betrothed or their husbands. (Deut. 22:20-24) It is easy to romanticize the story of the star drawn parents of Jesus but the truth of the Torah is that the law demanded Mary be executed for the apparent act of having sex with someone other than Joseph. This isn't just a morality play about a pregnant teenager. It's an accurate reflection of a community seeking to be purged of perceived evil. Joseph knew the rules, and he broke them. He knew the possible consequences, and he accepted them.

Joseph must have thought long and hard about what to do. Scripture says "he was a 'righteous man and, unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." This short sentence doesn't give credit to the stewing he must have done. He knows what he is obliged to do and what is obligated to happen.

But he can't bring himself to follow that violent path of purging. The price for driving out perceived evil is too high. So maybe he thinks, rather than reporting Mary and seeing her stoned to death, he'll just get 'unbetrothed' and leave her as her family's problem. But he can't bear to expose her to that public disgrace either. Before falling asleep he hits upon a resolution. He will not accuse her and see her executed. He will not leave her and see her shamed as her pregnancy becomes more noticeable. He will dismiss her; send her off presumably into the desert, to another village, another people, where perhaps she can make up a story for her abandoned, pregnant state, and hopefully find some help. Resolved, he goes to sleep.

But his heart is not closed, his mind and his soul not completely resolute. He is alert and restless enough to be woken by God's messengers as he sleeps. The first words he hears are the first words every character in this story hears. "Do not be afraid."

When we're tempted to recount this part of our faith narrative as something soothing to be told by the Christmas tree, with milk for Santa and carrots for the reindeer set out by the fire, we must remember what was and is at stake, of what was and are the dangers of embracing a new hope, a new world order, a new king.

“Do not be afraid” prefaces each of the appearances, of God, of the angels, of the voices of hope, peace, joy and love. Do not be afraid, of the tumult and turmoil that will come with a new way of being, a new world order. Joseph hears God’s word to him to fear not, but to go ahead and marry Mary and take for himself the paternal privilege of declaring the baby’s name. To make Jesus his chosen son.

The birthing of the new hope that is Jesus was aided and abetted by Joseph breaking all the rules. By Joseph being willing to risk not only the ridicule suffered by a cuckolded man, but the judgment coming to someone who knew the Law and broke it. Joseph lived out of a risky generosity, risking his own freedom, his own place and position in the village, his own reputation by not only rescuing Mary, but by embracing her and her son into his protection, at the cost of his life as he had known it. In trusting God, in trusting in the process of Jesus’ birthing, he is for us a model of God’s own radical receptivity, God’s own embracing of the wild possibilities in the most compromised and complex people and situations.

This isn’t the story of star driven lovers, but the story of risky generosity, and radical receptivity. It is the story of one man’s response to the voice of God calling in the night, and the miraculous new life that was birthed and is being birthed from that radical act of risk-taking.

Mary and Joseph lived in a tumultuous time, a violent time, a time of great oppression and despair. A hinge time, in which a new world was emerging. Our times are as wild and desperate, as threatening and as unstable. The good news is that “The dizzying variety of historical circumstances these texts traverse reminds us that, while exile and devastation are persistent realities, so are God’s love and promise;...” (Leonard Beech, Blogging Toward Sunday, Theolog.org)

As a congregation you too have experienced the unsettling call to be part of the birthing of God’s new thing. You have embraced challenges and lived in the unknown. You lamented, and left the familiar behind, journeyed to worship with the Anglicans, with unfamiliar people in an unknown place. You invested money, tears, sweat and prayers into the building of this new place. Then you started out on yet another journey, returning to set up a new home, some new ways of doing things, welcoming new members. You lost some beloved companions along the way - some found all the transition too much. And yet, you pressed on. Now, you might think you’ve arrived, you can relax, things will return to normal. But no.

Last Sunday was the first time I worshipped here. I sat in the back row and I was happily struck by the disruption that leaving your hearts open to God’s new thing has brought amongst you.

As Louise played the recorder, others accompanied her - young children who frankly, couldn't play as well as Louise but were doing their best on their own recorders to make a joyful noise. What a wonderful practice of inclusion, inviting the children to add to the welcoming music. Other children ran in and out, holding hands with their parents or their friends, exuding joy at being in this space, at being with you.

As I settled into the space I wondered if some of you might feel like Joseph - saying yes to God has led unexpectedly to the turmoil of small children in your lives and you're not sure you're ready for it. I've never served a congregation that didn't have some people concerned about the noise the children make. And I've never served a congregation that didn't lament the absence of children, and that didn't recognize that the absence of children marks the absence of vital signs of the presence of Christ's new life. Children are not our future - they are God's disruptive presence in the now. Saying yes to God's inbreaking realm can lead to such upset! Saying yes to call can change our lives, and as Joseph and Mary are happy to tell you, not always in a way we prefer.

At least twice last Sunday I heard a concern about finances, about the ability to carry on for the long term.

I'm sure Mary and Joseph had the same concerns, not about the long term but about the next day. Not about their comfort, but about the very life of their baby. The Christian call is not to long-term certainty, but to faithful living in times of uncertainty. Our job as members of Christian community isn't to figure out how to sort out and organize the uncertainty and chaos of our times - both within the congregation and the world. It is to figure out how to live as God's people in the midst of uncertain times. How to embody the hope, peace, joy and love of God's time amongst us, when there is so much upheaval all around. How to be with each other and our neighbours as compassionate and gracious companions on the journey, even when the way is uncertain. Especially when the way is uncertain.

The birthing continues; the call is still before each of us. Do not be afraid. As did Joseph, take Mary into your lives and receive with boundless love the baby she bears. Like Joseph, chose to love this child as yours, even as this child claims you for himself, and for the kingdom of God.

Do not be afraid. Radical receptivity and risky generosity are alive in this place and so then you can know also that Emmanuel, God is with you, every step of the way.

Thanks be to God. amen