

**4 Advent
December 22, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This is the season for Christmas trees, Santa Claus, and Nativity scenes. Nativity scenes with the baby Jesus in a manger surrounded by Mary and Joseph, shepherds, angels, cows, donkeys, and sheep, and the Three Wise Men.

I'm not a great fan of Nativity scenes. Yes, they tell the story of the birth of Jesus. But, whose story? Luke's version of the nativity is the one with the manger and farm animals, the angels and the shepherds. But, Matthew's version has none of those. Matthew has the Three Wise Men, but they come to the holy family a considerable time after Jesus was born. I doubt that he would still have been lying in a manger. And, Luke doesn't mention three sages from the East. Most nativity scenes are a conflation of these two versions of the story of the birth of Jesus. And, for all we know, both stories are made up ... at least embellished. But, just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true.

With that in mind, let's look at the reading from Matthew's gospel this morning. Our entry point into the Nativity story on this fourth Sunday of Advent is not Mary, or Elizabeth, or even John the Baptist. It is Joseph, a quiet carpenter who upends his good life for a dream. Joseph, who stand quietly in the background of every nativity scene.

If we are tempted to sideline Joseph as a minor character in the Christmas narrative, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that in fact, Joseph's role in Jesus's arrival is pivotal. It is his willingness to confront the impossible ... to embrace the scandalous ... to abandon his notions of holiness ... in favor of God's messy plan of salvation that allows the miracle of Christmas to unfold. As the author of Matthew makes clear in his genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah must come from the house and lineage of David, and so it rests on Joseph to give his name and his legitimacy to Mary's child. If Joseph refuses, the fulfillment of prophecy comes to a halt.

The reading this morning describes Joseph as a "righteous man," which is to say, he is a man devoted to God, and concerned with clean, ethical living. Though Matthew doesn't elaborate, I think we can safely assume that Mary's betrothed was not a person who liked to make waves ... or call attention to himself ... or venture too close to controversy. Like most of us, I believe he just wanted an orderly life. He was honest and hardworking. He followed the rules. He practiced justice and fairness, and all he wanted in exchange was a "normal," uncomplicated life. Was that too much to ask? Poor Joseph. Does he remind you of anyone you know?

As Matthew tells the story, the God-fearing carpenter woke up one morning to find that his world as he knew it ... and wanted it to be ... has shattered. His fiancée was pregnant, and he knew for sure that he was not the father, and suddenly, he had no good options from which to choose. He was between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” On the one hand, if he called attention to Mary’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she might be stoned to death, as Levitical law proscribed. If he divorces her quietly, she would be reduced to begging or prostitution to support herself and the child. If, on the other hand, he married her, her son would be Joseph’s heir, even if he wasn’t his own biological child. Moreover, Joseph would be tainted forever by the scandal of Mary’s illicit pregnancy, and by her ridiculous ... and perhaps blasphemous ... claim that the baby’s real father was somehow God.

I believe that when we look at a Nativity scene we tend to romanticize the entire picture ... including Joseph standing in the background. But can you imagine how this might have actually played out? There is an early Christian text that did not make it into the Bible, but it reports that when Joseph saw Mary’s swollen belly, he threw himself on the ground, struck his own face, and cried bitterly. He wondered long and hard how to respond, and asked Mary why she had betrayed both him and God so cruelly. Although this text isn’t in our Biblical canon, I don’t think it is too hard to imagine a similar scene playing out between Joseph and Mary in real life. The fact is, Joseph didn’t believe Mary’s story until Gabriel told him to. Why would he? Why would anyone?

I think we make a grave mistake when we sanitize Joseph’s consent. We distort his humanity when we assume that his acceptance of God’s plan came easily, when we hold ourselves at arm’s length from his humiliation and doubt. In fact, what Joseph’s pain shows me is that God’s favor is not always what I’d like to believe it is.

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus’s earthly father, God led a “righteous” man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God’s call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It required Joseph to become the talk of the town ... and not in a good way. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created ... to love a woman whose story he didn’t understand ... to protect a baby he didn’t father ... to accept an heir who was not his son.

In other words, God’s messy plan of salvation required Joseph ... a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy ... to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. So much for living a well-ordered life.

Then again ... for me at least ... Joseph’s story gives me hope. I don’t relate very well to a person who leaps headlong into obedience ... I’m too much of a skeptic. I can relate, however, to a person who struggles ... to a person whose “yes” is cautious, ambivalent, and scared. I’m grateful that Joseph’s choice was a hard one. I’m glad that he struggled, because I know I struggle as well.

Interestingly, in the verses that immediately precede our Gospel reading, the author of Matthew's gospel gives us a genealogy of Jesus's ancestors. He mentions Abraham ... the patriarch who abandoned his son, Ishmael ... Abraham, who twice endangered his wife's safety in order to save his own skin. The genealogy mentions Jacob, the trickster who humiliated his older brother by stealing his inheritance. The genealogy mentions David, who slept with another man's wife and then ordered that man's murder to protect his own reputation. It mentions Tamar, who pretended to be a sex worker ... and it includes Rahab, who was a sex worker. These are just a few of those included in this list of the ancestors of Jesus ... not exactly a catalogue of characters of purity.

Notice the messiness ... the scandal ... the complicated history. How interesting that God, who could have chosen any genealogy for his Son, chose a long line of brokenness, imperfection, dishonor, and scandal. However, placed at the beginning of Matthew's gospel it becomes the perfect backdrop for God's beautiful works of restoration, healing, hope, and second chances.

There is much to ponder in the Nativity story ... much to consider about the surprising ways of God. The God who brings salvation into the world through a young woman whose story about her own sex life was not believed. The God who brings salvation into the world through a well-meaning man who had to let go of righteousness in order to follow God. The God who brings salvation to the world through a cultural system obsessed with male honor and female purity. A God who brings salvation into the world through the flimsiness of dreams. A God who brings salvation into the world through a helpless, illegitimate baby.

No wonder that the angel Gabriel's first words to Joseph were, "Do not be afraid." You see, if we want to enter into God's messy story, then perhaps these are the first words we need to hear as well. "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid when God's work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God upends your cherished assumptions about righteousness. Do not be afraid when God asks you to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the marginalized, the suspected, and the shamed. Do not be afraid when God asks you to love something or someone more than your own spotless reputation. Do not be afraid of the precarious ... the fragile ... the vulnerable ... the impossible. That is the point. "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid of the mess. The mess is the place where God is born.

So, the next time you see a Nativity scene, look for Joseph. Then look inside yourself for the Joseph that you may know all too well. That Joseph part of you that wants a "normal" life ... a life without controversy ... a life in calm waters. Then ask yourself, how might God be calling you into messiness ... for your sake and the world's sake?

Do not be afraid of the mess. The mess is the place where God is born.

Amen.