

“Fair, Faithful, Hopeful”

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December 22, 2019

Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Sermon:

Wait a minute...this isn't the story we all know! There is only one angel, and this one appears only in a dream.

There's no travel to Bethlehem, on a donkey or otherwise. In chapter 2, you just sort of hear that they were living there in Bethlehem. There's no word of Mary birthing her son in a stable.

No shepherds, no glorious angel army singing "Peace on earth, good will to those whom God favors".

Instead, you have Joseph all over this story. Joseph, a "righteous man" a word that can also be translated, "Just man"...and he finds out that the young woman to whom he is engaged, is pregnant.

His right, as her husband, is to divorce her, and shame her publicly for "playing the harlot"...a biblical phrase that is code for "sleeping with a man who is not your husband".

He has every right to divorce her, for marriage is, after all, about the begetting of sons who will be Joseph's heirs, and carry on the name and lineage of the father. Some other man's son is not his interest or concern. And according to this text, Joseph has a lineage to be proud of and to protect; for the angel addresses him as "Joseph, son of David," and this is a clear reference to belonging to the house and lineage of King David.

Yes, it is confusing to us, because the text says that Joseph was married to her, according to Jewish custom of the time, but Mary was still living with her family; she had not yet finished the ceremonial move into Joseph's home and bed. That might happen as late as an entire year after the betrothal. But Mary was expected to act as bride and wife while she waited. She belonged to Joseph, and to be pregnant without his action as her husband and owner of her body, was a great scandal. In ancient days, according to the Law she could have been taken out of her parents' home and stoned to death (Deut. 22:20-21).

Joseph is just, “righteous” our text reads...righteous men knew the teachings of the Law and lived by it. Joseph knew what could become of this young woman and it was not good!

So, though Joseph knows the letter of the Law, he acts more in the spirit of the Law, and in an act of kindness, resolves to quietly divorce her.

Joseph also knows his scripture and the promises given in the past, through God’s presence with Joshua, who took over leadership of the Israelites, after Moses died. Perhaps Joseph recognizes the promise of God’s presence in this child; a child he is going to accept into his home and take the responsibility to name, Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus (all the same name, different forms). Jesus, Joshua, Yeshua: a name that means “Yahweh saves” in Hebrew.

Not only that, but in his righteousness, and his faithfulness, Joseph will adopt this child, son of Mary and son of God, into his own family tree, so that he is indeed, a “Son of David”.

Joseph wakes from sleep and does as the angel commands. He is fair to his bride, and faithful to the Law, and hoping in God’s design, trusting that this child will indeed heal the people of their brokenness, their sin, their errors, against God and against God’s creation.

Like the narrator of the gospel of Matthew, perhaps Joseph thought of the words from the prophet Isaiah, of a child who would be born and named “God with Us”, Emmanuel.

Perhaps in hope and faith and fear and love...all together in the heart of a good man who was trying to discern what was the right and the true thing to do...perhaps in that heart, the name Emmanuel came to him, as a comfort, as a possibility of joy against the darkness of the world?

That same Emmanuel comes to us, again, and again as we remember that birth, again and again; coming as vulnerable child, as gracious Messiah, as Resurrected and Eternal Logos of God.

The nature of God is not a tame nature however, and to open oneself to the possibility of God's presence in one's life...is to be a bit like a Joseph character, blown away by amazing messages that completely change your mind on something, even if they come in dreams!

Yes, a bit like Joseph, having the entire course of one's life and hopes altered by the life changing possibilities that God offers instead.

Stretching far beyond the bounds of propriety and beyond the bounds of ordinary expectations for one's life...and finding capacities in ourselves that we didn't even know we had!

The capacity to be people not just of obedience, but disobedience in the name of God, not just people who pray for help and deliverance, but through whom God will work that deliverance out.

We need Joseph in our gospel stories, in the birth mysteries of Jesus, because Joseph and his young wife Mary remind us that God comes to us as we are; comes to us as human beings with hopes and fears and flaws, and God works with us human beings, and that is crucial to recognize: it is humanity in all its variety, in its blood and sex and genders, families and cultures, that God lives, and dreams and works.

God doesn't demand that we be flawless and perfect, some sort of super human, God does require us to be human, for if we can learn nothing else from a deep look at Joseph and Mary, we learn that God loves us humans, hears our cries and responds to us not with a bolt of lightning but with a baby.