

## **December 15, 2024 - Joseph Do Not Be Afraid: Stay with Mary**

Good morning. I've been struck this Advent, as I've read the all-too-familiar stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of Mary, and now today of Joseph, by just how down to earth their stories are. Of course, it might seem a strange thing to say – that these stories are so down to earth – when they are also so spectacular and mysterious. Angelic visits, miraculous conceptions, and news of a coming savior, hardly seem like “down to earth” events.<sup>1</sup> And yet, each character we've encountered is also very human, very ‘normal’ – engaged as they were in the day to day of their lives at the time of their wondrous visitations. This dual-nature of the Advent stories – fully human stories met by the fullness of the divine -- is a good reminder for us of Christ's incarnation, God among us in human flesh. God doesn't just show up in special, set apart places, but in the humble places of life that we live and move and have our being in each day.

Today's story about Joseph is no exception when it comes to this dual nature of Advent. A righteous, law-abiding Jewish man, who Matthew later tells us (13:55) was a stone mason or carpenter, is visited by an angel of the Lord in a dream one day. But Joseph wasn't just visited by this divine messenger on any old day. He was visited during a very complicated time in his life, a time during which he was considering a very practical human matter: whether to stay in a relationship that, on the face of it, appeared to have been compromised by betrayal. Joseph and Mary were bound together already through a legal betrothal, although they had yet to marry. The families had been involved, the arrangements had been made, expectations had begun to build up, and a possible future was foreseen. And then, the news from Mary: “I'm pregnant.” Did this news come soon after her own visit from the angel? Or did she tell Joseph upon returning from

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the erudite and witty Amy Jill Levine and her work *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent* for highlighting this. See especially p.121.

her three-month visit with Elizabeth? Matthew, like Luke, omits so many details we might wonder about. How did that conversation go between Mary and Joseph? Or was it even a conversation between them? Did Joseph find out *from* Mary that she was expecting, or did one of Mary's family members, her mother or father, perhaps, find out and then relay the news somehow. Matthew's text uses the language that Mary was "found to be with child," so perhaps this is what happened. Whatever the case, Joseph now must decide. He is well within his rights to seek a legal divorce before taking matters any further. A marriage annulment would have been seen as appropriate and justified in this instance.

We can imagine at this point that Joseph's excitement was replaced by fear. All the arrangements, all the expectations for the future, were now replaced with fear of the uncertain future ahead for him and for Mary. We don't know how much time passed while Joseph considered his best course of action. Perhaps he sought council from his local Rabbi or ran through different options with a trusted friend. One option: he could believe this unbelievable claim that this child was from the Holy Spirit and stay with Mary, unsure of what was to come. Another option: he could think rationally and call this what it was, a major betrayal of their relationship - but still try to mend fences with Mary, perhaps delaying their wedding. Or, yet another option: he could decide that no matter how this child was conceived, this wasn't what he had signed up for and dismiss Mary, seeking an amicable way for each of them to go their separate ways. We learn from Matthew that Joseph eventually reached a point where he chose the third of these options. He began planning for the divorce.

Perhaps Joseph thought this would be best for everyone. Perhaps he was afraid that if he stayed with Mary, he would be consigning her to a future with someone she didn't love, or maybe that he would be consigning himself to a fractious relationship and to raising a child that

was not his own but belonged to someone else in the community. And so, he resolved to seek the divorce and to seek it in such a way that would protect Mary, sparing her from the possibility of public disgrace. Matthew notes that Joseph's quiet approach to the divorce displays his "righteous" character. Being a good Jewish man, he doesn't seek harsh judgment but rather seeks Mary's well-being even as he aims to end their relationship.

Jewish scholar of the New Testament Amy Jill-Levine notes that Christians should admire but not be surprised by Joseph's kindness. Historically, many Christians have contrasted Joseph's quiet approach to the divorce in light of Mary's presumed infidelity with a stereotype of the Jewish law as harsh and exacting, requiring deadly punishment for such an offence.<sup>2</sup> Levine notes that this interpretation is "bad history" given that there is no historical record that such punishments were ever actually given.<sup>3</sup> It is far more likely, she notes, that Joseph took this course of action because he thought "Mary was in love with someone else...[and was] concerned for her reputation" moving forward.<sup>4</sup> Levine goes on to say (and I quote):

I imagine that, had Joseph gone through with the divorce, Mary and her child would have been cared for by the people of Nazareth. With all the finger-pointing and tongues wagging that today often come with unplanned pregnancies, it is good to imagine that kindness could replace contempt.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The OT texts often cited here, Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10, should be understood as texts rooted in the broader context of ancient Near Eastern culture. Some scholars debate whether, even in those days, laws like this were observed with any kind of regularity. In other words, these laws should not be understood as timeless and unilaterally observed laws all the way up to Jesus' time. See footnote 3 below.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, *Light of the World*, 121. Even the infamous incident recorded in John 8 results in Jesus *using* Rabbinic logic, grounded in his own Jewish tradition, to arrive at an answer to those who called for the woman's stoning, supposedly on the basis of Mosaic law. As I understand it, "the law of Moses," in Jewish tradition, was always a matter for debate and discussion that could lead to differing conclusions at different times. Levine notes that the Rabbinic tradition "does whatever it can to prevent the death penalty from ever being carried out." (*Light of the World*, 121)

<sup>4</sup> Levine, *Light of the World*, 121.

<sup>5</sup> Levine, *Light of the World*, 122.

As Levine's imaginings remind us, the stories of Joseph and Mary display very human problems that involve real people making complicated decisions and managing many fears for what lies ahead in their lives.

But, as we've already seen in Luke's Gospel, in the midst of very human problems and in the midst of an environment of fear comes God's action to save and assure. And Joseph's story in Matthew's Gospel is no different in this way. Joseph, occupied with everything that has happened with Mary, and preparing to go through with his plans for the divorce, has a dream. Even this, too, is a very human experience, isn't it? I suspect many of us can relate to the experience of having our minds so occupied with a complicated life decision, that we find ourselves tossing and turning and perhaps even dreaming about the situation. But Joseph's dream reveals more than just a random product of his unsettled unconscious – no, his dream opens his imagination to the possibility of an alternative future. This alternative future is revealed through an unexpected visit by the angel of the Lord who brings the message: "Do not be afraid to stay with Mary," "do not be afraid to go ahead with the marriage." Joseph is back to the drawing board. His plans are upended yet again, and he is now asked to consider a path he had already dismissed as untenable – *staying* with Mary. I imagine Joseph's sleep being quite disturbed at this point in his dream. He had already charted his path forward and it was a difficult decision to make, and now he was being presented with a path in a totally different direction. What could possibly convince him to take such a path? And yet, if he went through with his plans to dismiss Mary, would he be able to shake the feeling that he was dismissing not only her, but also God's own command?

The reason the angel gave Joseph to persuade him was the same incredible reason that Joseph perhaps had already heard from Mary or someone else – the child "conceived in her is

from the Holy Spirit.” But now Joseph is drawn even deeper into God’s plan as the Angel gives him additional information: Mary will give birth to a son and Joseph is “to name [him]...Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." I imagine Joseph’s sleep shifting from a disturbed state to a state of settled calm at this point in his dream. While we’ve focused on the difficulty of this whole process for Joseph, Matthew’s Gospel gives us the impression that after Joseph woke up from this dream with this new information, he doesn’t hesitate but goes straight to Mary to tell her he’s changed his mind: he is going to stay with her – they will be married, despite this complicated arrangement. I wonder what that conversation was like.

Surely, Joseph and Mary would have discussed what the days ahead would look like – what having this child together and staying together would mean for them and for their future. They likely went over what risks lay ahead for them – where things would be difficult as a couple and as parents. Maybe they saw clearly enough that *staying* together might mean *leaving* a familiar path to walk one that was unfamiliar. They would have considered the costs. But I wonder, too, if their conversations were peppered with wonder and amazement, amazement at the promise that whatever path lay ahead, this child was God with them, and not just with them but also with their people. How would this Jesus save their people from their sins? And how would they, his parents, play a role in his life?

At this point in the Advent story, we leave Mary and Joseph as they chart an unexpected path forward. There is uncertainty ahead, and yet they have each been called to say “Yes” to being faithful bearers of God’s presence in the world by partnering together to bring Jesus into the world. And they were called to walk this path despite their fears, for they carried Emmanuel, God with them. In many ways, we too find ourselves at this point in the Advent story today. Maybe we can relate to Joseph in that we often find ourselves involved in making difficult

decisions that will impact our futures and the futures of those we care about. Perhaps, like Joseph, we need to consider whether we will let fear dictate the paths we decide to take, or if we will open ourselves up to the unexpected paths that God might call us to take, the paths that God promises to be with us on. Life brings us all sorts of complicated decisions, whether they be decisions about relationships of all kinds, decisions about our health and lifestyle, or vocational decisions to name just a few. Perhaps one key learning we can glean from Joseph's story today is that we must be ready and expectant in our listening, so that in times of complex decision making, we will be ready to dream possibilities beyond the limits of our vision. Sometimes dreaming beyond those limits might mean "staying" where we are and other times the dream God gives us might ask us to move forward on an unfamiliar path. Wherever our paths may take us, however, we are invited to walk forward into the future, taking to heart the Angels words: "Do Not Be Afraid." For with wonder and amazement we confess that we too are bearers of Emmanuel, God with us. AMEN