

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

December 18, 2022

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

This morning, I want us to consider Joseph. Not the cleaned up nativity version but the Joseph at the moment God got involved very deeply in his life. As I read the following reflection by retired minister Diane Strickland, I want you to notice some feelings that might have been going on for Joseph as he found out that Mary was pregnant...and not with his child.

*"Hello God,*

*After the worst had happened I couldn't speak to you. No words. I thought I might be finished. Faith was leaking out of me every day. Morning, noon and night passed. I couldn't see you anywhere. Sometimes I was awake the whole night, looking at the moon and the stars until the sun showed its first colour of dawn. I would try and do one thing in the morning that might call you back to me, but as the sun reached midday, I was still alone. It was long afternoons that followed until the sun disappeared and night came back. I stopped asking where you were and just waited for everything to be over. Such silence."*

Can you imagine it? I mean in that moment, for Joseph, surely it felt as if the worst had happened. Why God? Why? Why would you bring such shame upon me? Mary...pregnant? How could you do this to us God? God, go away! I can't speak to you right now.

Sometimes, God is hard to be around.

Divine intervention is a tricky thing because sometimes, God has plans for us that we didn't want for ourselves. Plans that don't make sense. Plans that challenge us in uncomfortable ways. Plans that make us change course and give up what is familiar. Think about it. How would you feel if you were Joseph? Would you want to speak to God?

What we know for certain is that Joseph was ready to divorce Mary, to end the situation and move on with his life. Our text from Matthew gives us that much detail. Because suddenly he found himself in a situation that required him to face messy and potentially humiliating consequences. To love a woman he didn't know he could trust, to take care of a child that he didn't father, to allow this story, this new life to become his own.

Now, Matthew doesn't go into specifics about how Joseph reacted, what he felt and why he wanted to quickly and quietly start over. We just know that he wants a swift resolution but we don't get a lot of emotional insight.

However, there is a critical perspective on Joseph in what is known as the Proto-Gospel of James (Protoevangelium of James). Written in the second century CE, the proto-Gospel serves as an additional source of information on the events leading up to Christ's birth and his early

years. Although the Gospel of James isn't considered cannon (meaning it didn't make the cut for the Bible), it is considered to be a source of instruction and insight. A way for us to get a richer picture of what it might have been like for Joseph and Mary.

The Gospel of James describes Joseph as completely distraught over Mary's pregnancy. In a dramatic moment of realization of what is transpiring, Joseph throws himself on the ground in anguish and he weeps. He first thinks someone has impersonated him and taken advantage of Mary.

He had promised Mary that the Lord would take of her no matter what and now this terrible thing has happened. Joseph, in the Gospel of James, is defeated and guilt ridden. And his mind begins to race. He begins to conclude that maybe it wasn't an intruder after all. Maybe it was Mary who betrayed him. His suspicions start to get the best of him.

In his shame and anger he calls out, "With what face shall I look upon the Lord my God?" Joseph doesn't even know how to be in God's presence. He doesn't want God around.

The situation becomes so dire that Mary has to defend herself to Joseph. Joseph is afraid...of the repercussions, of the gossip, of the legal fall out. A woman in these times would have been sentenced to death by stoning if accused of adultery. You can imagine how the walls must have been closing in on these two.

Mary and Joseph are eventually called into a tribunal to make their defense. And they are thankfully proven to be worthy of grace and mercy. And, so, the story proceeds as we know it.

If you had to go through that, would you want God around? Through Joseph's story we find a raw, uncomfortable struggle with God and with oneself. At the heart of this story is our ability to do the right thing in the midst of adversity, to not only trust God when things are hard, but to ask God to stick around and to be willing to follow God's will for our lives.

Raymond Brown, a leading theologian on the Gospels, argues that Joseph's final decision to take Mary as his wife was not simply out of kindness and mercy or even out of respect and awe of God. It was surely all of those things but it was also Joseph's grounding in the law of his faith that framed how he moved forward.

It wasn't just a feeling; it was a logical response to faithful accountability, of what the law required of him and what he knew to be his duty as a human being. Brown states that Joseph was ultimately both upright and merciful, obedient to the law and also to the love of God.

Sure, he could have left her...he had every right to. But, although it would have saved face for Joseph it would have left Mary vulnerable and unable to take care of herself. By allowing God to stick around, Joseph found the answers he so desperately needed, the answers that moved them both forward safely and securely.

And so when the angel said to Joseph, "Do not be afraid", the angel means it. God means it.

Let's go back to the reflection we started with. It ends this way...

*"Such silence. And no sleep. I became an expert on the phases of the moon, the brightest stars, where and when the sun would begin to rise, when it would be directly overhead and finally drop past the horizon with or without a stunning farewell. It became enough to let these forces move me into the future I could not see myself.*

*Even the next day is part of the future, right? This was all I had. But it kept me going while my faith leaked out of me (there was a lot of it) and soaked the earth and misted the air with tears and cries you did not answer. Just night and moon and stars, then dawn and rising sun to midday fullness and sunset turning me toward night again. It was evening. And morning. Another day.*

*And suddenly, there you were. Creating my future. You never stopped. Thank you."*

That's what I want you to take away from Joseph's story. God never stops creating. God never stops loving. No matter what. Sometimes it's just hard to see the way forward. And in those moments of doubt and frustration and sadness we remember the words of the angel...Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. God is with us. Amen.