

Matthew 1:17-25

I closed my Twitter account recently because Elon Musk had bought it and is turning it into a cesspool. I did so with regret, though, not only because Twitter satisfied my need to know about the news right away, like when Queen Elizabeth died, a matter of urgent importance to me, but also because it had supplied me with the random delights of human ingenuity. Like the Halloween potato lady. I may have found a new social media home, but I'm not sure yet. Anyway, my point is, before I closed it out, I read another delightful story, this one about nativity scenes. It seems that the poster's neighborhood was experiencing mysterious disappearances from their home nativity scenes. When enough people had noticed it and started talking to each other about it, it emerged that the children had been collecting and trading figures like baseball cards. "I'll give you a Mary for two Wise Men," that kind of thing. The nativity scene characters were all over the neighborhood in a riot of unorthodox configurations.

Oddly, but unsurprisingly, Joseph was not a high-value figure. He's sort of a prop, an adjunct to the mother-child dyad. I've actually begun collecting images of the Holy Family that disrupt that dyad, just because it's so rare. I have a picture of Mary reading in bed while Joseph holds the baby, and another of Mary completely racked out asleep while Joseph tries to calm a very squirmy Jesus. Both are medieval, by the way, not modern. But today Joseph gets his story told, however briefly, and it is quite lovely.

Joseph and Mary are betrothed, and in an interesting use of the passive voice, Mary "is found to be with child." This is obviously a problem, but there is a decision tree for this, found in Leviticus. If a man has sex with a married/engaged woman in town, they both get punished

because she obviously (!) chose not to resist and cry out. If it happens in a field, only the man is punished because the woman may have cried out and not been heard. Joseph is a righteous man—a Torah-observant man—and he would know what to do. But he doesn't. He does not even begin an inquiry into whether this happened in town or in a field. He simply doesn't ask the question.

Mary's pregnancy is still a problem, though. They are not yet living together, barely connected, and now with the evidence that she's broken their potential connection, why sign up for the whole drama? Joseph should cut his losses, preserve his own reputation, and let her suffer the Levitical punishment. But because he's a kind man, he resolves simply to walk away and not make an issue of how he's been wronged. Mary and her family will deal with the consequences, which will be hard, but Joseph will not pile on.

Then of course the angel appears to him in a dream and tells him not to walk away but to marry the girl and raise the child as his own. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, Joseph is being asked “to be willing to believe in the impossible, to claim the scandal, to adopt it and give it his name, to not only accept the whole mess, but to rock it [tenderly to sleep] in his arms.”

[Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*]

And pretty much just like that, Joseph does. He accepts the damage to his reputation, which in an honor-shame society is serious damage. He names the child, giving it his lineage. The genealogy in Matthew is Joseph's genealogy, not Mary's. It only becomes Jesus' genealogy by virtue of Joseph adopting him. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel calls him, and that's how Jesus gets to be descended from King David. Joseph not only cares for this new family, but also turns his life upside down for them: he moves to Egypt, then relocates from Bethlehem of

Judea to Nazareth in Galilee, on their behalf (Amy-Jill Levine, [Women's Bible Commentary](#), p. 468).

This Joseph is a stand-up guy. He exhibits a certain kind of humility—the Hebrew word is something like *avenah*—which is not a self-diminishing, lowly kind of humility, but a willingness to inhabit one's correct place. Just as Queen Esther had to sort of step up boldly to inhabit her place as the only person who could save the Jews in Persia, so Joseph has to step back from his pride and reputation in order to provide Mary's child with a family, a lineage, an identity. In this story, which is short and doesn't talk about Mary's experience at all, what Joseph has to offer is his name and his presence. It's simultaneously not much and everything, and he gives it without objection.

The angel tells Joseph to name the baby Jesus, which is Joshua in Hebrew. Joshua was, and is, a very common, ordinary name like Joe or John. It means "the Lord will save." But it's also the name of Moses' successor, who led the people into the Promised Land and guided them to live into the next chapter of the covenant. The name "Emmanuel," of course, means "God with us," and that was not to be the baby's name but what he would be called (a distinction that probably doesn't have to be made). These are extravagantly hopeful claims to make; they're the father's prerogative, as the namer—and Joseph makes those claims. He inhabits his correct place (*avenah*) with audacious trust in what the angel promises.

If Advent is a time of waiting for something new and hopeful, Joseph is our Advent saint. He hadn't had to do any of this. He was righteous and Torah-observant, and he could have opted out of the whole mess without anyone thinking badly of him. I suppose God would have figured out something else. But God didn't have to, because Joseph said Yes. When he heard

the Advent call for a world that lives by different rules, he stepped up. When he heard the Advent call to live in the light of God's promises, and not to be bound by what is expected, he complied. That's a huge miracle! God is always coming to us in ways that allow us to say No, and I for one probably say No without even recognizing what's going on. Joseph, being a righteous man, even knew *how* and *why* to say No, but being more than righteous—being in tune with God's deepest law which is kindness—he said Yes. Yes to this child being a son of David by adoption. Yes to this child being so endangered that they would have to flee to Egypt. Yes to the possibility that Joseph's living by kindness would open a future for everyone that would be ruled by kindness and hope and recognition of the divine light in the other.

As the Rev. Maxwell Grant observes, we really don't know anything about Joseph's parenting style, and the gospels aren't reliable guides for things like that anyway. But "we know that the love that Jesus talked about--the love he stood for-- . . . --was just that kind of rule-changing, deep-seeing kind of love... that kind of non-abandoning, instinctive, sheltering, protecting, guiding love...just that kind of patient, quiet, healing love"ⁱ that is being modeled here in Matthew's gospel by Joseph the dad.

What I want to take from Joseph's story is that combination of humility—knowing your place in a story—and audacious hope, the confidence that beyond what's known to be right is whatever is loving, even more right. In a way he doesn't have much to give, just his ordinary dadly self, but of course it's also everything and it doesn't stop being needed. AND I think Joseph finds the grit to commit to the whole mess out of his profound store of love, the love that led him in the first place to say Yes to the angel.

Let us pray. God of waiting and expectation, help us welcome you with joy as we look at

the world with new eyes and open hearts unafraid to break any rule but the rule of loving you
and all that you have made. Amen.

ⁱ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200379c/expecting_christmas