

December 18, 2022
"It Takes a Village"
Isaiah 7:10-16 / Matthew 1:18-25
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Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus, as we noted a couple of weeks ago. The Greek word translated "genealogy" is *genesis* – meaning "origin;" which is the same word translated as "birth" in the reading Theresa just shared with us. As in, "Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way."

Now whether it did or not is not a matter of historical record. Believe what you will, but again, Matthew's aim – writing primarily to a Jewish audience – is to trace Jesus' royal and divine lineage. To place him squarely in the line of Jewish history and tradition. To hold Jesus up as the fulfillment of prophetic witness.

Believe what you will, but understand that God's salvation is unfolding over time. Over generations. God's salvation is ongoing.

The genealogy starts with Abraham and ends with Joseph – described in the genealogy as "the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." Or the Christ, in the original Greek.

We need only note that the genealogy does not map a pure bloodline. According to Matthew, Jesus was born of Mary, but not Joseph – which, of course, makes Joseph Jesus' stepfather. So in more ways than one, it's also worth noting that Jesus is born into a non-traditional family. Thank God for non-traditional families!

In any case, if Joseph was an actor, his role is important – but it's what you might describe as a cameo. In Matthew he's first mentioned in the genealogy, then only in the birth narrative that follows – a description of his engagement to Mary, and then a series of three dreams. Three appearances by an "angel of the Lord."

The first, which we'll get to in a minute, is what we heard this morning – confirming his role in the holy family. The second prompts Joseph to flee from Herod, to Egypt, with Mary and the baby Jesus. And the third leads him and the family back to Israel after Herod dies.

That's it in Matthew. Other than that, he makes just three brief appearances in Luke's gospel:

- registering the family before Jesus is born, as decreed under occupation by the Emperor Augustus;
- seen by the shepherds, along with Mary, at the site of Jesus' birth;
- and then, finally, curiously, when Jesus is 12 and opts to stay behind in Jerusalem, after the Passover festival, while his family proceeds to head home without him. And Joseph is not named, only referenced, in this case. He and Mary, as Jesus' "parents," realize he's not with them after a day's journey and go back to get him. The parents do not come off well in this story.

In any case, all that may seem like a lot, but remember – other than this passing reference, Joseph ONLY appears at Jesus' birth. And then he's written out of the script. He doesn't even have any lines. He doesn't speak a single word.

It's as if he no longer has a role to play. But his absence through the rest of Jesus' story betrays his significance. Mary rightly gets prominence and prestige as a lead actor, the mother of Jesus – most famously evidenced in her monologue, her song, her Magnificent, rejoicing in the fact that she, of all people, will literally be the bearer of good news! Good news that will scatter the proud and bring down the powerful and fill the hungry with good things.

Mary's glorious, courageous 'YES' to God's invitation – "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." – is the most important 'YES' in Jesus' unfolding story. There IS no Jesus without Mary's 'yes.'

And it's a yes that invites us all to consider how we might give birth to, and labor on behalf of, the good news of love incarnate. Love made flesh.

But Joseph's 'yes' – strikingly uttered without a word, only action – is arguably no less important.

So back to Matthew and our reading, we know that Joseph is engaged to Mary when they learn that she's pregnant. Mysteriously and miraculously with child from the Holy

Spirit, though it's not altogether clear from the text whether JOSEPH knows this. Or understands this.

It is, to be sure, an UNBELIEVABLE and compromising situation for both of them. We know, from Luke's account, that Mary has already offered her RESOUNDING, shout-it-from-the-mountaintop 'yes.' In spite of any fear she would inevitably and understandably have had.

Joseph is clearly not the father. According to Jewish law, as described in Deuteronomy, Mary's offense – that she is engaged but no longer a virgin – likely could have been punishable by death. And Joseph likely would have been well aware of such a brutal law.

Whatever the truth was, the wider community would assume Mary's infidelity. And any word that she was somehow pregnant by the Spirit would surely have made a spectacle of her. Imagine.

Described in the text as a "righteous man and unwilling to expose (Mary) to public disgrace," Joseph is inclined to quietly call off the engagement. And disappear. To write himself out of the script.

We don't know if he's discussed this plan with Mary. One can only hope, though regardless of risk, one also cannot imagine Mary being down with his plan – even if her age, or the cultural norms and expectations of a decidedly patriarchal society, might have compelled her to go along with it.

In any case, Joseph appears earnest in trying to protect her from the harshness of the law, and the harshness of public opinion – though dismissing her, of course, would also leave her in an incredibly vulnerable position as a single mother-to-be.

The preacher and scholar, Fred Craddock, calls Joseph the first great interpreter of scripture – superseding and subordinating the letter of laws like this one found in Deuteronomy, with the spirit of justice and compassion. Much like his stepson, Jesus, will do.

As one commentator puts it, “Joseph wisely acts upon a justice deeper than what is merely ‘legal’ ... Against the shadows of hateful violence dressed up as law, Joseph acts with merciful love – and the Gospel story begins.”

But as the dream sequence reveals, Joseph is also afraid. Likely on multiple levels. You can’t blame him. I mean, put yourself in Joseph’s shoes.

Just as he’s set to put his plan into place, an angel appears. This is dream number one.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child is from the Holy Spirit.” The angel doesn’t say, “don’t be angry” or “don’t be heartbroken.” Just “don’t be afraid.”

Name the child Jesus, which, by the way, the angel Gabriel also, separately, tells Mary to do. I guess to make sure they get it right?! The name “Jesus” derived from the Hebrew *Yehoshua*, or Joshua – meaning, “Yahweh saves.” God saves.

Now again, we might assume that Joseph already knew that Mary was with child from the Holy Spirit. That would understandably explain his fear. But we don’t know for sure, so the angel is either ANNOUNCING the news to him (as has, according to Luke, already been announced to Mary), or the angel is simply CONFIRMING.

Regardless, “do not be afraid” seems to be exactly what Joseph needs to hear.

The text – that is, from Matthew, not the angel – goes on to reference our Isaiah text, as Matthew does repeatedly. Again, lifting up Jesus as a fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy.

The prophet, in this case, is assuring King Ahaz that God will protect Judah from their enemies, and uses the prophetic symbol of a young woman giving birth to a child named “Immanuel” – “God is with us.”

To be clear, Isaiah did not think he was predicting someone centuries down the road. And he definitely was not speaking about any kind of miraculous “virgin birth.” The Hebrew word often translated as “virgin” simply means “young woman.”

Isaiah is simply using a prophetic symbol of God’s action, God’s abiding presence, in the world. Like Jeremiah’s image of a potter remaking a pot.

The point is not that someone is coming in the future, but that God is present with you, with us, now. God's salvation story unfolds over time, and we are invited to participate in its unfolding, but God is with us now. Emmanuel. The God who saves us is already with us.

Joseph wakes up from the dream, and all we're told is that "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." He did the right thing. The righteous thing. Without a word, at least without a recorded word. No inspiring speech, just faithful action to support his wife, Mary, and his stepson, Jesus. To raise Jesus as if he was his own son.

In cameo, Joseph is there for the birth and helps guide the family safely through the terror of King Herod's reign. And then he disappears from the story.

But he doesn't go away. He moves through the background, faithfully fulfilling his supporting role as husband, father, provider. It's almost as if he doesn't need to be named, even seen; we just we know he's there.

It takes a village. It ALWAYS takes a village.

Brief as his recorded role is, Joseph stands out for his quiet, yet courageous 'yes.' Joseph has no song like Mary. He stands out for his trust, for his humble obedience, for stepping up, in spite of UNBELIEVABLE circumstances. And in spite of prevailing religious rules and cultural norms.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests, "... maybe most of all Joseph is an image of an unremarkable person through whose ordinary life God does remarkable things. ... When we speak of Christ being born in our hearts, you may not be called to be a Mary; maybe you're a Joseph, supporting Christ's birth in those around you."

Mary has a lead role, for sure, but maybe our invitation is to be a supporting actor like Joseph. To speak less with our words than with our actions.

In Catholic tradition, Joseph is regarded as the patron saint of workers. So knowing that it takes a village, how might we be workers for the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love? As members of the village, how will we participate in God's unfolding story of salvation?

How will we step up to support the ongoing birth of love incarnate, and the ongoing labor of love made flesh in a world so fragile and broken?

How will we bring Christmas closer?

Garnaas-Holmes poetically captures the story, and the Advent invitation that comes with it:

*Joseph, trapped on this side of the gulf,
for holiness unfolds beyond you,
now affirm what you cannot know,
say yes and go silent;
stand by faithfully.*

*Mary, trapped on the far side of the gulf,
for holiness grows within you,
now trust what no one but you can know,
say yes and sing your song;
open yourself faithfully.*

*Others will not know
and claim loudly to know, and judge,
and you will smile silently,
tip your head slightly to the side
and carry on and not abandon your Beloved.*

*So, bewildered, we find ourselves enfolded
in the blessed mystery of grace promised,
outrageous belief that in our pains and labors,
in our unknowing, in the cells of our loneliness,
something magnificent unfolds in us without us.
Knowing only how we believe and not what,
without turning back,
we lay ourselves in God's dark hands.*

Christmas comes close through HOW, not WHAT, we believe. Through actions, not words. Christmas comes close through the village. It always takes a village.

May it be so.