

“And They Named Him Jesus”

Romans 1: 1-7, Matthew 1: 18-25

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Last week we considered the marvelous story of the incarnation from a mother's perspective. Luke's gospel highlights Mary's story. Mary shares this miraculous news with her cousin Elizabeth and subsequently with rest of the world through the song of joy we know as the *Magnificat*. Today, we hear about the good news of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective. Matthew is the only writer to include his perspective. Joseph's side of the story is essential. When God chose Mary, it changed not only her life, but Joseph's and everyone who loved them. In and through Mary and Joseph the whole world would change. In order to get to that moment of transcendence, two people had to go through a painful and difficult process of discernment. It is easy to romanticize the birth of Jesus. Mary was blessed with a child by the Holy Spirit. While traveling to be counted in the census as obedient folk would have done, she realized she was ready to deliver the baby. So together, they found a quiet, comfortable place in a barn to give birth because there was no place for them in the cozy warm inn. Cue the violins, dim the lights, the baby is born.

If you listen to the entire story, the one we tell throughout the Advent season, it is not very romantic. The Advent story, which concludes today with an angelic visitation to Joseph, is filled with surprise, amazement, awe, scandal, disbelief, heartache and a lot of prayerful discernment. The Holy Spirit visits a young woman and after a period of contemplation she agrees to become the mother of Jesus. The Holy Spirit visits the man who would raise this child and assures him that even though he is not the biological father, all will be well. There is no reason for Joseph to worry about what others will think. Joseph is invited to reconsider his decision to divorce Mary when an angel appears to him in a dream. Even though it appears as though Mary has acted scandalously and that Joseph has every reason to break off this relationship, the angel persuades him to make another choice.

From Matthew's story we understand that Joseph was a righteous man. He has been raised in the faith, and therefore, even at his young age, he was aware that what was happening goes against what he had been taught. No one would blame him if he were to cut his ties with Mary to let her face the consequences for what has happened. Joseph however is compassionate. He wrestles quietly with his decision to dismiss her. Let's not make this more difficult than it already is. Eventually he reconsiders.

I came across a story about a beautiful small Gothic chapel built on the Old Santa Fe Trail in 1873. You may wonder what a chapel has to do with Joseph's dilemma. When the historic Loretto Chapel was built, the architect forgot to include a way for the nuns to reach the choir loft. The sisters weighed their options, but all were equally undesirable. They could build a conventional staircase, but that would take up too much room. They could rebuild the balcony, but that would be far too expensive. They could climb a

dangerous ladder up and down; but that would be an accident waiting to happen. So the nuns did what you and I should do when faced with a difficult situation—they prayed.¹

Joseph seems to be faced with a similar predicament, trying to figure what to do when every choice seems to be negative. Divorce Mary publicly, divorce her quietly, still the choice is to end their relationship. In his mind there seems to be no hope to redeem what has happened. Joseph never considered that Mary's unbelievable story could be true. One writer says, "It never occurred to him that the only thing lacking was his embracing of that truth—and the situation would be transformed."

What do you do when you face difficult situations in which your choices all seem negative? Perhaps you find solace in a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream or you stew for a while in silence. Maybe you take your stress out on your loved ones or blame someone else for the situation in which you find yourself. I can sympathize with Joseph. When faced with such an outrageous situation he turned to his faith for answers and every solution felt wrong. He could see nothing but negative choices until the angel visited him in a dream. While he is sleeping, when his defenses were down and he might hear the liberating word of God, an angel speaks to Joseph. He assures him not to be afraid. In fact, the child Mary carries is from the Holy Spirit. When he is born, he is instructed to name him Jesus, for "he will save his people from their sins." This will happen to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

I give Joseph a lot of credit. He wakes up and he knows exactly what to do. No questions asked. I would not have woken from that dream with such peace and understanding. What was God thinking, choosing this lowly teenaged couple from the middle of nowhere to be the parents of the one who will save? How do you explain to your family and friends that God told you to name your child such a thing? We all think our children are the center of the universe but having the nerve to actually call him "God with us" or "Savior" and believe this is completely different. I am astounded by such amazing faith and trust. If this angel is anything like Clarence in the much beloved classic, "It's a Wonderful Life," he certainly has earned his wings!

You can imagine the angel's pep talk to Joseph, "Son, believe Mary's unbelievable story. Marry her, and become the father of God's child. God chose you to be this child's father. He will need not just any father, but a father like you, one who is trusting and trustworthy, who can nurture, and is faithful. He will need you to teach him to take risks, to be supportive when his decisions seem crazy, to not listen to what other people say and to follow the will of God instead of the reason of the people. This child will look to you as an example of what happens when you stand in the face of an impossible decision and choose life." Somehow Joseph awoke the next morning and knew deep within his being what he needed to do.

¹ Alyce McKenzie, "The Fear of Betrayal, Advent Reflections on Mathew 1: 18-25," *Patheos*, December 11, 2010.

The world is blessed because Joseph was open to being transformed. In the end he was fearless. Alyce McKenzie says, “Jesus is not the only one who needs an example like Joseph. For we all struggle with tough situations and yearn for assurance from one who knows from experience that God’s unbelievable good news is true! If we prayerfully ponder the example of Joseph this Advent, surely God will work in us as God worked in him.”

I almost forgot to tell you how the nuns of the Loretto Chapel handled their staircase dilemma. It seems that one night while the sisters were praying about their predicament, a white bearded stranger appeared at the door of their convent asking for work. A toolbox was strapped to his burro and he told the sisters he was a carpenter. When they told him their problem, he offered to build a spiral staircase. His spiral staircase was an engineering feat for its time, containing thirty-three steps and two complete turns of 360 degrees with no center support. The carpenter used wooden pegs instead of nails, and his only tools were a saw, a T-square, and a hammer.

As soon as the staircase was finished, the unknown carpenter disappeared without asking to be paid. Many today believe the carpenter was indeed St. Joseph.

Oh, perhaps it’s just a legend. But perhaps Joseph is out and about this Advent, toolbox in hand, a model of faith offering hopeful solutions to hopeless dilemmas. Don’t be afraid. God has come to dwell among us. Trust and believe and God will make it so. Just ask Joseph! Amen

Source:

Alyce McKenzie, “The Fear of Betrayal, Advent Reflections on Mathew 1: 18-25,” *Patheos*, December 11, 2010.