

Dreaming and Trusting with Joseph

Uncomfortable Conversations; Unexpected Revelations

Matthew 1:18-25

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December 22, 2013

Picture the conversation between Mary and Joseph. Mary says, "Joseph, we need to talk." And Joseph might then be thinking, "Now what have I done?!" When she says, "I'm pregnant," he knows that in fact, he hasn't done anything, and in this case, that is the problem. Because if he isn't the father, then who is? If he isn't the father, then Mary must have been cheating on him. If you were Joseph, what would be going through your head? If you were Mary, what would be going through your head? It's pretty clear to Joseph that he isn't the father of this baby. He's done everything the proper way: they've done the official engagement or betrothal, which is not a social announcement and party like our engagements are today. Today, we can break off an engagement without any legal ramifications. Yes, it is difficult to end an engagement, there is pain involved, and it takes a great deal of emotional discernment, energy and courage in order to do so. But in Joseph's day, engagement was a legally binding contract. The period of betrothal lasted about a year, during which time the couple continued to live with their respective families. There was no sexual consummation of the marriage until the public celebration of the wedding. After the public event, the wife went to live with the husband.

Joseph is a righteous man--a good man, trustworthy, upright, treats people well, follows the laws and customs. He has done everything properly in relation to Mary. So, Mary's announcement that she was pregnant would have come as quite a shock to him, I'm sure. I can only imagine how devastated he must have been.

I remember the shock, discomfort, pain and all the other emotions that came with the announcement from my 18 year old brother that his 16 year old girlfriend was pregnant. There were lots of questions about what this meant for both of them and the huge life-long implications of this.

Further back in my family history, I learned--maybe at the same time as my brother's announcement-- that a great-aunt became pregnant by her brother-in-law during the time she lived in their home, taking care of her half-sister, who was ill, and her children. My great-aunt ended up moving out of the area for a few decades, and her sister and brother-in-law raised the child as their own. I can only imagine the difficult conversations and the roller coaster of emotions that situation created.

After the difficult conversation between Mary and Joseph, he had a decision to make. We are probably surprised that he chose divorce. That doesn't sound like an action for a righteous man to take. But for Joseph, there were really only 2 choices--to have Mary publicly stoned for adultery or to quietly divorce her. He had no desire to shame her, so chose the quieter path of divorce. There was no option for him to forgive and forget. As a man concerned with doing everything properly, divorce seemed to be the most compassionate route.

The story the Gospel of Matthew tells is a very different birth story than the Gospel of Luke. Matthew's is much more concise, and includes the story of Herod's determination to find Jesus, the journey of the wise men, and the slaughter of the children by Herod in an attempt to kill Jesus. Compare that to Luke's annunciation to Mary, her Magnificat, the journey to Bethlehem, the stable birth, the shepherds and angels worshipping. Matthew uses 31 verses to tell his story, and Luke uses 130 verses. (Marcus Borg, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/12/two-christmas-pageants/>)

What is also interesting about Matthew's account is the genealogy that comes before the birth narrative. This genealogy is an important part of establishing Jesus' lineage--that he comes from the line of David. It ends with, "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." (1:16) The genealogy ends by placing Jesus in the genealogy through Joseph, but in our passage this morning, we have Joseph leaning toward divorcing Mary quietly. The genealogy ends with a problem that this birth narrative is highlighting and trying to resolve.

But the problem of Jesus' lineage isn't the only problem this genealogy highlights. It is an unusual genealogy in that it includes a number of women--highly unusual for its time! And the women it includes are all women with questionable birth stories--Tamar, who seduces her father-in-law (in order to hold him accountable to fulfill his obligations in terms of giving his second son to her in marriage in order for there to be offspring in her dead husband's name....and therefore a livelihood for her); Rahab, a prostitute; Ruth, who married Boaz under unusual circumstances; and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, whom David seduced and impregnated. Quite a colourful family tree, this lineage of Jesus! The rest of us can be somewhat comforted, maybe, by this history of family dysfunction?!

The experience of family, for some of us, is that it is an unlikely collection of wonderful and odd personalities. Our families and stories include people and events we wouldn't always have chosen; our families and stories have taken us to places we would never have dreamed--the good and the bad; our families and stories have shaped us in ways we could never have planned or anticipated.

So here we sit with Joseph, part of a story he didn't plan or choose, facing a decision he never dreamed he'd have to make. The icon for this series depicts Joseph sitting outside of the cave where the Christ child is lying. Joseph is not looking at the Christ child; he is deep in conversation, or thought with the man in the centre of the icon--Satan, the tempter. Joseph is faced with a choice about his family tree--do I say yes to this newest member of the family, someone I had no part in creating? Or do I quietly divorce the woman I love, going our separate ways, keeping our family trees in separate gardens?

Some of us may be disturbed by the presence of Satan in The Nativity of Christ. It is not the way we picture the birth of Christ; it isn't the image of the happy holy family we have. The presence of Satan is a blight on an otherwise idyllic scene. And yet, it is the reality for most of us, that between us and the manger, stand a whole host of temptations, distractions, and decisions that impact if, how and when we approach the Christ child. Whether we are conscious of it or not, Satan daily places before us obstacles

in our path to Christ. We may not think of our temptations as Satan--I don't usually, but when I saw this icon, it rang true to my experience. Temptation, whether with a capital 'T' or a small 't', is a daily companion, watching and waiting to see which path I'll choose; whispering words that would have me choose the path of least resistance, the conventional, socially acceptable path, rather than the more difficult path to Christ.

Here we sit with Joseph, on the way to the manger. He has a decision to make--will he divorce Mary, taking the expected and conventional path for a man whose wife is caught in adultery, or will he trust his dream and the angel who appeared to him in it, saying the child was conceived in her from the Holy Spirit? This child, who he is to name Jesus, will save people from their sins, and is the fulfillment of the promise in scripture that a child would be born who will be Emmanuel, God with us. If he says yes, he is adopting Jesus and placing him in his family tree, inviting and incorporating into his family this unexpected gift.

And in this icon, Mary stands watching and waiting to see what Joseph will do. Mary, whose own vulnerability and confusion must surely have contributed to her going to see her cousin Elizabeth. What will Joseph do?

What will we do? Are we ready to say yes to the unexpected ways in which God appears to us? Entering into our lives in ways we could never plan or anticipate? Often ways we would never choose?

The beauty of this story of Jesus' birth is that we know the outcome. We know that in Joseph's saying yes, God's power and grace were evident and abundant--maybe not immediately. I'm sure Joseph wondered what he had said yes to as they were fleeing to Egypt in fear for their lives and the life of their baby. I wonder how Joseph felt, watching Jesus grow up and choose a path that would eventually lead to his death. Did he question his yes to God? Did he wish for a child who would have followed in his footsteps, and remained a carpenter? And yet, in many ways, Jesus learned well from Joseph, his earthly father, about saying yes to the difficult choices. "Jesus had a father to teach him to take risks, even when tempted not to; to withstand the disapproval of others; to teach him what to do when all hope seems lost; to teach him how to believe the unbelievable and walk ahead in faith, in

spite of evidence to the contrary. In Joseph, Jesus had a model for how to walk the hard road to [the cross], for Joseph had already walked the hard road to [the manger]." (Alyce McKenzie, Edgy Exegesis, patheos.com, 2010)

In hidden and not-so-hidden ways, God came to Joseph in his yes, and continued to give him the courage to trust and believe that this path was the path of love and grace. Just as God's faithfulness is evident in Joseph's family tree--using unlikely people and outsiders as key players in God's work of justice and peace--so God's faithfulness and grace were evident in Joseph's life and continue to today.

We, given time and eyes to see, might also be aware of how God's grace has revealed itself in our own families. For my brother and my great-aunt, the paths chosen were not, and have not always been easy, but the unplanned and unlikely people who have become part of my family tree are beloved family members, teaching me about love and perseverance and determination and grace. Over time, these stories and people, in all their odd and wonderful mixture of function and dysfunction, become so much a part of our story, that we would not be who we are today without them, for better or worse.

God, in love and grace, continues to enter our families and stories, using them and us to heal and restore this world. God, through the gift of Christ, said yes to us. May we have the courage to say yes to God.

You are each invited forward to receive God's gift of love through anointing. Dan, Lois and I will be up front with oil. This is God's gift of love for you. Receive it in joy and gladness. May God's love, offered as a gift in Jesus, strengthen you, heal you, empower you and make your heart glad.

Let's read the litany together, and then you may come forward for anointing.