

Jesus' Other Parent

Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 1:18-2

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I have always had a particular fondness for Joseph, perhaps in part because my son played Joseph in our congregation's annual Christmas pageant, taking a role his sister had played two years before. (Apparently we Copenhavers are of the house and lineage of Joseph).

But Joseph gets rather short shrift in most renderings of the Christmas story. For instance, our congregation's hymnal does not have a single hymn that even mentions him. By contrast, many hymns praise Mary:

What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin, mother and child...

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all around
While mortals sleep, the angels keep, their watch of wondering love.

Bring a torch, Jeannette, Isabella!
Bring a torch to the cradle and run!
It is Jesus, good folk of the village,
Christ is born and Mary's calling.
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is the mother!
Ah! Ah! Beautiful is her son!

But what about Joseph? Is he beautiful? Are there no songs to be sung for him? Visit some of the world's great cathedrals and look at the stained glass depictions of the nativity, or flip through a book of religious art, and you will see countless renderings of Mary and the babe, beautiful and glowing portraits of the mother and child. Sometimes Joseph isn't even depicted, as if he were nosed out of the scene by the cows and the sheep that press toward the manger, or as if he were cut out of the painting, as one might crop a snapshot. Even when Joseph makes it into the family portrait, he looks more like a bystander than a participant in the scene, as if he is merely part of the scenery rather than a player in the drama.

This would be in keeping with Luke's version of the Christmas story. Luke barely mentions Joseph. As Luke tells the story, it is all about Mary. Luke is the one who tells about how Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel. And Luke gives Mary her own song to sing, the great hymn known as the *Magnificat*.

But Matthew tells the story differently. In Matthew, Joseph's role is central. In his version of the story, Joseph gets his own artful depiction. Even in Matthew's Gospel, Joseph doesn't get any lines to say, but that too seems to be part of the portrait.

Joseph was a righteous man, Matthew tells us, one of those good people of few words, solid and simple as the wood he works with in his trade as a carpenter.

For Matthew, the heart of the story is about a just and good man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his betrothed pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked, his dreams shattered in pieces all around him. And in the midst of the shards his life has become, Joseph faces a dilemma. The law and his personal sense of honor demand that he break off the engagement. After all, Joseph is a righteous man. But Joseph also knows the terrible cost of publicly divorcing his wife-to-be on the charge of infidelity. Either Mary would be killed, as the law prescribed, or at the very least she would be disowned by her family and left to scratch out her living however she can, feeding herself and her illegitimate child on whatever she can beg or steal. So, to preserve his own dignity and to spare Mary's life, Joseph decides to divorce her quietly, an early version of one of those quick and quiet no-fault divorces, an arrangement that would let them both try to rebuild their lives, one broken, jagged piece at a time.

When your dreams are dashed, when as you struggle with fear and grief, they seem only to tighten their grip on you, when your mind spins in the same awful and familiar circles all day long, it can be exhausting. But sometimes there is a blessing in that, because sometimes it is only when we are weakened enough and tired enough that we are able to listen. So it is in sleep, when Joseph can do no more righteous things and ponder no more of his own thoughts, that he can finally hear what God has to say to him. That is, when his own waking dreams are destroyed, Joseph is invited to hear God's dream for him and for all humankind. "Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit," an angel tells him in a dream. "So don't be afraid to marry her. Don't be afraid." And when he wakes, Joseph receives the salutation as a gift from God. Somehow, in the stillness of the night, in the darkest hours, in that death-like state called sleep, Joseph is able to let go of his own dreams in order to dream God's dreams for the world.

No wonder Matthew seems to have a particular fondness for Joseph. Here is a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with creating and decides to believe that God is present in it. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a neater, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife, Joseph does not do that. He claims the scandal, he owns the mess—he legitimizes it—and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born.

In some way or another, at some time or another, I think all of us have been given reason to believe that we are of the house and lineage of Joseph. Perhaps you can remember times when circumstances seemed to cast you in just such a role. You had your plans, your dreams, your own idea of how things would turn out. Then one day you find yourself presented with circumstances you did not choose, living a different life than the one you had in mind. You may ask, "How did I get here? And, however I got here, how do I get out?" You may want nothing more than to divorce yourself from everything you see around you, from whatever your life has become. But it is at such a time, if you are tired enough and weakened enough, that you too are invited to hear the whisper of an angel saying, "Do not fear. God is here. It may not be the life you had planned, but God can be born here, too, if you will permit it."

"If you will permit it." It is a fragile mystery that is entrusted to each of us, the mystery that God's birth requires human partners—a Mary, a Joseph, a you, a me—willing to believe the impossible, that God can be at work even in the midst of our own

shattered dreams. Human lives being what they are, we are all invited to accept the whole sticky mess and rock it in our arms.

Of course, our individual lives are not the only ones that seem to be in such a mess. There are times, and surely this is one, when the whole world seems like one shattered dream. And it will take the faith of Joseph to believe what the angels endeavor to tell us in our dreams, that God is still with us, that God is struggling to be born, not just in spite of the mess, but in some way through it, in ways that are still hard for us to imagine.

I have never seen a stained glass window devoted to Joseph. That honor is usually reserved for others in the Biblical drama. Of course, a stained glass window can be a stunning thing. It seems to glow, giving the light of the sun colors that it does not otherwise possess. But the next time you see a stained glass window, note this: It is not beautiful because it is perfect. Rather, it is made of glass that has been broken into shards, all those little jagged pieces that are then painstakingly reassembled to reveal a beauty that we could not imagine if those same pieces were still scattered at our feet. So it seems to me that Joseph, of all people, deserves his own stained glass window.