

12-18-16 "No Morning Sickness For Joseph" A Reflection on Mt. 1:18-25 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

Having visited some with Mary last week, today it's equal time for Joseph. And as we just heard, it's Joseph's turn to have a run-in with an angel. We Church people call that an annunciation BTW. This being the Annunciation of Joseph. Whereas the evangelist Luke identifies the angelic "announcer" when Zachariah and Mary are "visited" by name, as Gabriel, Matthew fails to name-drop. Though Matthew's Gospel is longer than Luke's, Matthew offers very little detail regarding Jesus' birth, and in the process neglects to identify Joseph's angel by name. Now before we get too concerned about this little omission, I have to tell you that as far as I'm concerned it had to be Gabriel. I mean, come on now. Joseph is no small-fry in God's Salvation Plan. Right? Therefore it seems safe to assume God would also send the very best to Joseph? Right? Gabriel being of course Heaven's Arch-angel, meaning superior to every other angle named and unnamed...sort of next in line to the Throne of Grace after the Trinity. And if there was ever a man who needed to be impressed and persuaded by God, it was Joseph. So clearly this wasn't a moment where God had the luxury of messing around with a second-rate-angel. I mean, think about it.

As Matthew is scant on details we're given the opportunity to fill in the blanks. For example we're told Mary was "found to be with child" and given no information as to the extremely uncomfortable conversation that would have taken place when Mary informed Joseph of this not so little detail. "Say, Honey, I have something to tell you...got a minute?" And if such a conversation between any man and any woman wouldn't have been sufficiently complicated Matthew makes it all the more complicated by dropping in one additional narrative detail, "found to be with Child *from the Holy Spirit*." Say what? From the Holy Spirit! What we don't have any way of knowing is if when Mary had her sit-down with Joseph she said to him "BTW, I'm with child *from the Holy Spirit*" or if that is only an after-the-fact narrative point that Matthew inserts to aid us, his readers, to understand the big picture.

Now as we well know, the inclusion of the Holy Spirit is huge. Holy Spirit, as in the force that created a new heaven and a new earth in Genesis one; Holy Spirit, as in the force that divided the waters permitting God's people to escape slavery in Exodus. The same Holy Spirit that called matriarchs, prophets and apostles into dangerous lives of extreme faithfulness. And the same Holy Spirit which on Pentecost gave birth to what we call the Church. Yes, huge. And in the case of Mary, the Holy Spirit obviously is also the difference between an adulterous affair and a Divine intervention.

It would seem that at the initial stage Joseph was ignorant of the Holy Spirit's role in Mary's pregnancy, this for the simple reason that his first reaction was to call the marriage off--"to dismiss her quietly"--which believe it or not, was actually a very noble and admirable thing for him to do. Indeed, it was the most loving, gracious and forgiving option that, at that time, he believed he had. It wasn't until Gabriel visited with him in a dream that Joseph was presented with a brand new option, one that he could never have imagined had it not been for Gabriel. The third option was, as we heard in our lesson, to take the child as his own son and to name him Jesus. In the ancient world a man who gives a male child a name legally becomes the child's father, which happens independently of biological paternity. As we know this is what Joseph did--he became Jesus' father--but let us not underscore how huge a leap of faith this would have required from Joseph.

We're told Joseph was a "righteous man". The meaning and significance of this may not be readily apparent. "Righteous" is religious talk for "good, honorable, faithful and faith-filled". But Joseph was an even better man than that. He was not one to be hemmed in by the letter the law; he was not into judgment and punishment, as many fundamentalists tend to be. He, as the UCC says today, understood that God is not nailed down, God is Still Speaking. Yes, that is our Joseph. There was obvious grace, and there was love, and there was charity, and there was mercy, in his heart. His religion and culture required that Joseph "expose Mary to public disgrace" but Joseph "resolved" very early on, "to heck with that" that he would have no part of that, that he would buck the system, that he would rebel, that he would spare Mary and her family such required "exposure" and would instead divorce her quietly, behind the scenes...sparing all involved such a messy spectacle.

And then he went to sleep. And then God sent Gab. And then he woke up. And there was no morning sickness for Joseph...just a new resolve to journey with Mary and God. At which point, it would seem, Joseph became an even better man than the exceptional man he already was, as Joseph took Jesus as his son. And the rest is history. But not so fast because there is room for us to find our place in this drama as well.

Upon reflection it's refreshing to me that at the get-go Christmas was a struggle. I mean, the world turned upside-down for Joseph. Yes, last week we heard Mary sing, bursting with an ecstatic joy, which may or may not have in part been a product of her youth; as it could easily have been a product of the Holy Spirit and the Child within her womb, but even after his angelic visit we never hear of anything of the kind from Joseph. The weightiness of Christmas had to land on somebody and the somebody apparently was Joseph. Joseph never fully gets around to feeling merry and bright. Go Figure. Meaning, the nativity of Christ is far from a simplistic, warm and fuzzy tale, as it is often made out to be. It is real world and it is heavy duty.

Which is not to say that Joseph was a scrooge. Far from it, actually Joseph has become the patron saint of all who struggle to feel the joy of the season. Somehow, by some grace, Joseph overcame the world's pragmatic tendencies. Where the world testifies that one would have to be an utter fool not to presume Mary's infidelity, Joseph instead fully embraced the unprecedented thing that on faith he accepted God was doing and was capable of pulling off. Somehow, Joseph overcame a host of overpowering emotions—distress, betrayal, shock, hurt, fear, disappointment, etc., etc.,-- and with Mary they somehow moved forward, living into their divinely complex, very unforeseen relationship. And despite the world, or to spite the world, the world then and now brimming over with nay-Sayers and hate-mongers, and spreaders of false news, Mary and Joseph, all on relatively short notice, dedicated their lives to Christmas, to God's Son, to goodness, love and charity. This they did even in a world filled with tyrants and demagogues and power-people intent on amassing more power and more wealth, even in a world spinning on the brink of self-destruction, Christmas could not be deterred. Where two or three gather in Christ's name, remember, there is Christmas.

Joseph and Mary dared to trust that a better world was still possible and that they—backwoods, nobodies--could play an instrumental role in bringing that new world to life. Due to their ability to do so, their faith then we have faith and have reason for faith in our day and in our world. Becoming instruments of God's grace has always been a long-shot to be sure, but that hasn't stopped it from happening time and time again. And guess what? I dare proclaim to you that that is the real meaning of Christmas—the ability to overcome all the challenges, setbacks, upsets and frustrations of our life and in their place place God's life at the center of your life. It has happened and it can and will continue to happen.

A poet by the name of Ann Weems puts all this to verse:

The Christmas Spirit is that hope
which tenaciously clings
to the heart of the faithful
and announces
in the face
of any Herod the world can produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark night of our souls
that with God
all things still are possible,

the even now
unto us
a Child is born.

So, Merry Christmas to all; to all a Child is born! And congratulations, if you bear any resplendence to Joseph, if Joseph is understood as your patron saint, then congratulations! You're with Child too! Or rather, Emmanuel—God is with you!

Thanks be to God and amen.