

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Well we may still be a week out from Christmas, but today we read the entire Nativity story in the gospel of Matthew! It's ok if you missed it, it went real fast, just a single verse and not even a whole sentence long. "But he, Joseph, had no marital relations with her, Mary, until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus." That's it! That's the whole story! There's no away in the mangers, no "no room in the inn for travelers weary" no "certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay" no "angels we have heard on high" Matthew doesn't even specify what time the birth took place so no "O Holy Night" either. Thank God for Luke, otherwise we'd be really short on Christmas carols!

In Matthew's mind, Christ's conception is a marvelous thing, and his *linage* is important. Matthew *really* wants people to understand that Jesus is descended from the line of David and thereby fulfills prophecies of the coming King of Israel. And everybody hold on to that theme, because we're achieving it in a rather unexpected way. But, like WPLC, Matthew is much more interested in getting to Epiphany, than dawdling on Christmas.

So yes, in this passage, Christ is born but...that's not really his focus. And it's not Mary either, she'll get some attention in the next chapter, don't worry. But today, Matthew is wholly focused on Joseph. Which, great for him! Because out of the whole holy family, Joseph really gets the short end of the stick. His name doesn't appear in the gospel of Mark *at all*, and John only mentions him once when

describing Jesus –“isn’t that Jesus, Joseph’s son?” Paul and the rest of the Epistle writers, they’ll talk about Mary, but Joseph isn’t mentioned by them at all. Everything we know about Joseph we learn from Matthew and Luke. And in both of them, he’s only mentioned in the first two chapters. After that he just abruptly disappears from the story.

And until *last year* I operated under the assumption that Joseph’s disappearance from the story indicated that he was like an unsupportive parent. Maybe he grudgingly helped raise the kid, but once Jesus got to be an adult, washed his hands of him. I mean *Mary* shows up in the middle of Jesus’ ministry trying to talk to him, and she’s very explicitly there when Jesus is crucified. But not Joseph. And I admit I carried some resentment towards Joseph about that. Like geesh, even if you didn’t like Jesus, you can’t even be there for your wife when her son is being executed by the state? And then Jesus has to--while on the cross!--entrust his mother’s care to one of the disciples?! Why isn’t Joseph caring for her? Why is this on Jesus to sort out? He better have a really good excuse for that!...And then, last year, I learned that most biblical scholars agree that Joseph probably died before Jesus’ public ministry began, likely sometime when Jesus was a teenager or in his early 20’s. So yeah, he’s not there for Jesus’ mom during the crucifixion...because he’s *already dead* and both of Jesus’ dads are watching those events unfold from heaven. So...yeah he’s got a good excuse for missing that.

And I felt *really really* bad when I realized my mistake. It was a good reminder to me that people’s life stories are complicated and usually you don’t get all the details of their situations, so I shouldn’t jump straight to judgment with whatever incomplete information I do have. Otherwise I’m the fool being bitter and resentful

that a dead person wasn't doing more and accusing a good man of dropping the ball, which the more I learned about Joseph, the more convinced I am that he would be mortified that anyone think that lowly of him. Joseph was a genuinely good man, and by the little snippets we have of him while he still lived, he was a loving father to Jesus. But a lot of the detail showing that love is obscured, not readily identifiable without understanding cultural practices at that time. So I'll unpack them a bit so we can see Joseph the Nurturing Father of Jesus better.

I think one of the stumbling blocks here is that Matthew is so concerned with treating Mary delicately that he inadvertently downplays the extent to which Joseph protects her. But let's put ourselves in Joseph's shoes for a moment. You're engaged, your fiancée *abruptly* leaves town and goes to her cousin's house where she remains for three months...and then she comes back and you hear that she's pregnant. Obviously you're not the father, so it would appear that Mary had an affair and became pregnant as a result. Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man who was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, so he planned to divorce her quietly. And he's glossing over the finer details of what "public disgrace" for Mary would consist of since the audience he's writing for would be well aware of it. He's alluding to a particular bit of Deuteronomy "If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you should take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death." Were Joseph to hold to the letter of the law, the entire story of the incarnation would grind to a halt before the third trimester. Mary would be painfully battered to death by a vengeful mob, and Emmanuel along with her. Just think of all the ways history would have changed if this one man had decided to adhere to the law instead of choosing mercy. Joseph doesn't yet know who fathered this child, to him this pregnancy is

no different than any other pregnancy that comes about as the result of an affair. He's the wronged party, it would appear to be obvious that his fiancée betrayed him. We might understand how someone in that position might seek vengeance. But Joseph the Just, chooses mercy. He'll divorce her quietly, draw as little attention as possible to her condition, and let her figure out what she's going to do now herself. It'll be hard for her, sure, but much easier than being stoned to death. This was an astonishingly kind decision on Joseph's part.

Perhaps Matthew is suggesting that that decision itself was a vetting process for Joseph. Mary too got her moment to say yes to this...admittedly quite bonkers plan of God being made flesh. But it seems like it was only once Joseph showed this extraordinary amount of mercy that God finds him to be a suitable coparent for God's son. And, much like his great ancestor who lived thousands of years before who Joseph is presumably named after—the one with the technicolor dream coat, perhaps you've heard musicals of him—God sent word to this Joseph in a dream finally cluing him in on the plan God and Mary have been working on. Joseph gets invited to join them on this, but doing so won't be without consequences for him. Mary's pregnant, the whole town knows he's not the father, taking her as a wife anyhow would be quite scandalous and a blow to his own public reputation. Joseph does it, seemingly without question.

Luke makes it clear that when an angel appeared to Mary to ask her to sign on to this endeavor, she asked some follow up questions first. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Which you know, fair question. Where I in her position, I'd have a *lot* of follow up questions about that process. But Joseph doesn't say anything in his dream. No questions or doubt or concerns or anything else. He doesn't say anything

at all. Not just in this story, but in *the entire Bible*. Mary sings a whole song, but Joseph doesn't get a single word. And that doesn't mean he doesn't do anything and isn't being a supportive parent! The next chapter of Matthew details another dream Joseph has, where an angel tells him to take the Christ child and his mother and flee to Egypt because Herod wants the boy dead. And Joseph does, again without argument. There's no cell phones, they're going into hiding so probably can't hand out forwarding addresses. No time to say goodbye to friends and family. Egypt is around 500 miles away, and they are escaping on foot, across mainly desert and rocky terrain. This is not a jaunty Sunday afternoon stroll. And all of this with his baby son. Joseph gives up his whole way of life, his business, his extended family and the vast majority of all the people he's ever met and cared for, in order to keep his son safe. When Joseph the Carpenter woke up from that first dream we read about today, he went as all in as Mary.

Even Mark, who doesn't say Joseph's name, still calls Jesus "the carpenter's son" with no qualifiers in that statement to create distance in their relationship. And the reason for that is jammed in the last five words of today's reading. "And he named him Jesus." And at first glance, that might seem like a less significant piece of information. Ok cool they listened to the angel's directions and named him Jesus. But *they* didn't name him Jesus. Joseph did. The act of bestowing the name on a baby is significant. When Joseph names him Jesus, he isn't just saying "this is what you should call this baby." He's saying "this is *my son* here is what you should call him." This is a legal adoption. Joseph isn't content with remaining "step parent" or "foster-parent" we're not doing "young ward" he's not going to qualify their relationship by only referring to him as "adopted son" or refer to him as just "Mary's bastard." And he *could*! All of those descriptors could accurately describe

who Jesus is to him. Joseph gets to decide how he's going to define their relationship. And he looks The Son of God right in his little newborn eyes and says "this is *my son*, his name is Jesus. His mother, Mary is *my wife*. If anyone has anything to say about either one of them, you go through me." You want to talk about what "traditional family values" look like, look no further. Biologically Jesus may be the Holy Spirit's, but legally he's Joseph's. And in this adoption, all of Joseph's lineage, that all transfers to Jesus too.

Which is good news for us because...the scriptures said the Messiah would come from David's line and...that great big lineage of Jesus that Matthew starts his gospel with? That traces Jesus' ancestry back over 40 generation and outlines, amongst other things, the exact manner in which he was descended from King David, thereby fulfilling those Messianic prophecies? We're not tracing it through Mary's family! The genealogy ends with "and Jacob, the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah."

Joseph doesn't say a single word, but the gospels resonate with what he said nonetheless. Every time the gospel writers assert that "this was done to fulfill the scriptures" every time Jesus is referred to as Messiah, or Christ, every time someone yells out from the crowd "Son of David, have mercy on me" all of that points back to this quiet little moment. Of Joseph naming *his* son, and in doing so, he testifies Emmanuel. God is with us. Amen.