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Into the Mess

Matthew 1:18–25

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matt 1:19–20)

Who gives Joseph a thought once Christmas is over? The poor carpenter who dreams dreams; he's so easy to sideline. He barely speaks in the Gospels, his pivotal narrative moments occur while he's asleep, and he fades from sight soon after Jesus's infancy. According to the Gospel of Matthew, though, Joseph's role in the Incarnation is pivotal. It is the humble carpenter's willingness to abandon his notions of holiness and embrace the scandalous that allows the miracle of Christ's arrival to unfold. As Matthew makes clear, the Messiah must come from the house and lineage of David, so it rests on Joseph to give Mary's child his name and legitimacy. The fulfillment of ancient prophecy rests on him.

Matthew describes Joseph as a "righteous man," which is to say, a man devoted to God and concerned with ethical living. Though Matthew doesn't elaborate, we can assume that Mary's fiancé is not a guy who likes to make waves, call attention to himself, or venture close to controversy. Like most of us, he wants an orderly life. He's honest and hardworking, he follows the rules, and he expects to lead an uncomplicated life in exchange. Is that too much to ask?

Poor Joseph.

As Matthew tells the story, the God-fearing descendent of King David wakes up one morning to find his world shattered. His betrothed is pregnant, he knows that he is not the father, and suddenly, he has no good options to choose from. If he calls attention to Mary's pregnancy, she might be stoned to death, as Levitical law proscribes. If he divorces her quietly, she'll be reduced

to begging or prostitution to support herself and the child. If he marries her, her son will be Joseph's heir, and Joseph's biological offspring will not. Moreover, Joseph will be tainted by the scandal of Mary's illicit pregnancy and by her ridiculous claim that the baby's dad is somehow God.

Matthew doesn't go into much detail about Joseph's anguish. However, the *Protoevangelium of James*, an extracanonical text from the second century CE, gives us a fuller, harsher picture of the carpenter's pain.¹ When Joseph sees Mary's swollen belly, he throws himself on the ground, strikes his own face, and cries bitterly. He wonders long and hard how to respond and asks Mary why she has betrayed him so cruelly.

Though this text isn't in our canon, it's not hard to imagine a similar scene playing out between Joseph and Mary in real life. The fact is, Joseph doesn't believe Mary's story until Gabriel tells him to. Why would he? Why would anyone?

We make a mistake when we sanitize Joseph's consent. We distort his humanity if we assume that his acceptance of God's plan comes easily. In fact, what Joseph's pain shows me is that God's favor is not the shiny, anodyne thing I'd like to believe it is. It's not the God of the New Testament who promises us wealth, health, comfort, and ease. That's just me, getting it wrong.

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father, God leads a righteous man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God's call requires Joseph to reorder everything he thinks he knows about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It requires him to become the talk of the town—and not in a good way. It requires him to embrace a mess he has not created, to love a woman whose story he doesn't understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who is not his son.

In other words, God's messy plan of salvation requires Joseph—a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy—to choose precisely what he fears and dreads the most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. So much for living a well-ordered life.

Then again, Joseph's story gives me hope. I can't relate to a person who leaps headlong into obedience. I *can* relate, however, to a person who struggles, a person whose acceptance of God's will is cautious and ambivalent. I'm grateful that Joseph's choice is a hard one. I'm glad he struggles, because I struggle, too.

Interestingly, in the verses that immediately precede Joseph's story, Matthew gives us a genealogy of Jesus's ancestors. He mentions Abraham,

1. Vuong, *The Protoevangelium of James*, 1–116.

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the patriarch who abandons his son, Ishmael, and twice endangers his wife's safety in order to save his own skin. He mentions Jacob, the trickster usurper who humiliates his older brother and his father-in-law. He mentions David, who sleeps with another man's wife and then orders that man's murder to protect his own reputation. He mentions Tamar, who pretends to be a sex worker, and Rahab, who is one. These are just a few representative samples.

Notice anything? Anything like messiness? Complication? Scandal? Imperfection? How interesting that God, who is free to choose any genealogy for the Christ, chooses a long line of broken, imperfect, dishonorable, and scandalous people. The perfect backdrop, I suppose, for God's relentless work of restoration, healing, and hope.

There is much to ponder in the Nativity story, much to consider about the surprising ways of God. What kind of God brings salvation to the world via a young woman whose story about her own sex life is not believed? Via a well-meaning man who has to let go of righteousness in order to follow God? Via a cultural system obsessed with male honor and female purity? Via the flimsiness of dreams? Via a helpless, illegitimate baby?

No wonder the angel Gabriel's first words to Joseph are, "Do not be afraid." If we want to enter into God's messy story, then perhaps these are the first words we need to hear, too. *Do not be afraid.* Do not be afraid when God's work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God upends your cherished assumptions about piety and faithfulness. Do not be afraid when God asks you to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the suspected, and the shamed. Do not be afraid when God asks you to love something or someone more than your spotless reputation. Do not be afraid when your role in the story feels minor, and the spotlight of fame and fortune doesn't land on you. Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible.

Do not be afraid of the mess. Embrace it. The mess is where God enters the world.