

Sacred Knowing

Matthew 1:18-25

December 18, 2022 Fourth Sunday of Advent *Reflecting the Sacred series*

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Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV

Poor Joseph. I've owned several creches and nativity sets over the years and every year when I set one of them up, it seems a bit unfair. The three kings have crowns. Mary and the angels often have halos. Joseph just stands there. Plain. With no head covering and no special light, he fades into obscurity.

I once heard a story about a church's Christmas pageant from a colleague. On the night of the play, the pageant director came to the pastor, panicked saying, "We have no Joseph! He's called in sick." The pastor said calmly, "Just have one of the shepherds stand near the manger with Mary. Nobody will notice that Joseph is missing. He doesn't have a speaking part." He doesn't even have a speaking part. Maybe that's why it is has been so easy to overlook Joseph. Maybe we need to look again at Joseph. What can we discover in these ancient stories about the birth of Jesus?

The Christmas stories join metaphysics and mysticism in the messy incarnation of Jesus. Last week I talked about Mary who was visited by an angel to say she will have a baby who is the Promised One and she then goes to see Elizabeth. Today's reading is about Joseph's dream with an angelic visitor who tells him about his pregnant fiancé and a world changing birth.

One way to see the stories of the birth of Jesus is a call and response that portrays human agency and adventure as much as divine providence. God called to Mary and Joseph, but the

success of this holy incarnational call depends on their “yes,” their willingness to embrace the risks of incarnation in a patriarchal and oppressed social order, when out of wedlock children were catastrophic for pregnant women. (1)

Joseph’s immediate solution, to rid himself of this particular nightmare, was to break off their engagement quietly. And to his credit he does not want Mary shamed in anyway. Technically, under Jewish law, Joseph could have called for justice. Mary could have been stoned to death. But instead of acting hastily he deliberates and sleeps, and then dreams. And what a dream!

An unexpected window opens and with it, divine light and guidance. An angel of God reassures Joseph that a higher purpose is at work. A new earth-shattering plan for humankind has begun and God needs Joseph to take his part in the unfolding drama. Amazingly, Joseph does what is asked of him. He takes Mary as his wife even though she is pregnant. A long 9 months of protecting her and managing their safety in small town Nazareth.

His response to God’s call is an act of faith, a radical faith. Joseph may have not been a man of words, but he was certainly a man of action. To marry a woman who was already pregnant and then to raise her child knowing that the child was not of his own body was to break the law as stated in the Torah. The action he took was contrary to his own religion’s beliefs. He elevated compassion—his concern for Mary—above strict adherence to the law. He must have weighed his options and reflected on how the Holy One was calling him. And then opted for compassion and relationship over punishment and separation, compassion over religion and religious laws. He knew what to do. A different kind of knowing.

Sometimes people ask me, “How do you know the story of Jesus’ birth is true? Is real? How do you know?” One way I might respond is – I know because I have experienced this Holy Love and presence born in me and the world. No singing angels, but experiences of love in both the darkness of night and light of day that I cannot explain in words. I experience love and unexpected and unconditional actions of kindness, justice, compassion that is rooted in church, in biblical stories, in community, imperfect, human, but also holy. Here is what I do know – there is mystery.

And I may point to both the story of Joseph who knows because of a dream and Mary in the Annunciation story where we read, “But she was much perplexed. How can this be?”

It is not that the Annunciation leads her out of doubt and into faith; it is that her encounter with the angel leads her out of certainty and into holy bewilderment. Out of familiar spiritual territory and into a lifetime of pondering, wondering, questioning, and wrestling. She was much perplexed. (2)

Mary and Joseph would have had a belief about the Yahweh, Elohim, the Holy One shaped by their Jewish religious practices. In my Presbyterian upbringing, I was raised with a picture of

who God is and how God operates in the world. If anyone had asked me to describe God when I was 15 or 20, I would have rattled off a list of divine attributes - “God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is Three and God is One. Loving Father. God is holy, perfect, loving, righteous, merciful, just, and sovereign.” . . .

What an interesting shock reality and life experiences and reading have offered. In some ways my spiritual life could be described as one long goodbye. That to know God is to unknow God. To shed my neat conceptions of the divine like so many old snakeskins and emerge into the world vulnerable, open and new, again and again. Maybe you too are wondering what it means to unknow God, the Holy, She who is the source of love, He who is Creator of the Cosmos, the one who is beyond gender and neat categories and names. To know a deeper presence all year long, especially at Christmas.

Mary and Joseph - their “yes” meant a consent to evolve. To wonder. To stretch. To learn that faith and doubt are not opposites—that beyond all the easy platitudes and pieties of religion. They come to know that God dwells in mystery & the unexpected.

We need different kinds of knowing – rational, logical, factual truths, scientific knowledge. And the knowledge that comes symbols, story, silence, without words. We need scientists and artists, dreamers and engineers, mathematicians and poets. Both kinds of knowing in us and the world and in the church.

What do we know about the biblical story of Christmas? We know the Holy One invites us to wonder, to ponder, to wait, to hope, in the darkness of night and dreams and hillsides, in the light of starlight and new life. This is part of sacred knowing.

Christmas, with the sacred story of the one born and laid in a manger, ruins people for mind-your-own-business living, and pulls us head over heels into a life of trusting, and resting, and hoping, putting into practice our unbreakable belonging to God and each other, and joining in the healing and loving and shalom that God is always bringing into the world. I know this is true. So, like those gone before us, and all the faithful from every place and time, we too anticipate the future by accepting our role in the sacred drama of redeeming love now. Amen.

- 1) Bruce Epperly, The Adventurous Lectionary – The Fourth Sunday in Advent, 12.8.22, Patheos <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2022/12>
- 2) Debi Thomas, “Holy Bewilderment,” 12.7.22, Center for Action & Contemplation <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/holy-bewilderment-2022-12-07/>

For more on Knowing and Not Knowing, see Richard Rohr’s Daily Reflection series January 26-31, 2020 <https://cac.org/themes/knowning-and-not-knowing/>