

*Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity  
Advent 4A, Love*

“Now the birth of Jesus the Christ took place in this way.”

It takes Matthew only seven verses to tell the story of Jesus’ birth. And most of those verses are about Joseph and the dilemma of Mary’s pregnancy. There is no element of Matthew’s birth story that makes it to the front of a Christmas card. It isn’t part of any Christmas pageant. Matthew’s story is more like a family secret, the story that’s whispered in the background, to the new in-laws, the new neighbors, that parents tell their children when they’re old enough to understand.

We like Luke’s story better. The maternal joy of Mary’s story, the animals, the shepherds, and a sweet baby capture children’s imagination. And when we become adults, we want to hold on to the greeting card images and pageants of innocence and simplicity of Jesus’ birth.

But Matthew’s brief story. It’s full of paternity and righteousness and the scandal of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Matthew begins his gospel with 17 verses of genealogy, tracing the beginnings of Jesus the Christ all the way back to Abraham. At one level, it’s tedious to read that much genealogy. But then, when we take the time to read it carefully, it gets most interesting. Beginning with Abraham. Abraham had two sons but only Isaac is named. No mention of Ishmael, his first son, the one Abraham dismissed when he dismissed Hagar. And there’s Tamar. The woman who was treated un-righteously by her dead husband’s family. So she took matters into her own hand, posed as a sex worker, and became pregnant with Judah’s son, Judah, son of the patriarch, Jacob. And when the genealogy reaches David, Matthew names Uriah, the man and husband that King David had killed so that he could have his wife. This genealogy is full of family scandals and secrets. The scandal around Jesus’ birth is nothing new.

Matthew's detailed genealogy frames and informs the story of Jesus' birth. God has been at work through the generations. The Spirit of God has been blowing and breathing in flawed human beings and in our scandals through time. And today we find ourselves with Joseph, the descendent of Abraham and Jacob, and the son of another Jacob.

In Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus' birth, he wastes no time in revealing the scandal. Joseph is engaged to Mary. And she is pregnant but Joseph is not the father. This presents a problem...it always does. Of course we know what Joseph will do. Matthew wouldn't take all that time to lay out a genealogy that leads to Joseph if Joseph ended up dismissing Mary. But even so, Matthew tells us about what happens to Joseph. So while he says that it's the story of Jesus' birth, it's really much more the story of Joseph becoming the father of Jesus.

This man who will be the father of Jesus the Christ is a righteous man. In such a brief story, every detail is important. The implication here is that Joseph followed the community's traditions and practices that had been handed down through generations as his people lived out how they understood God wanted them to live. Deuteronomy 22 is one text that outlines specific practices and expectations around sex and sexual morality. There were tests for proving, or disproving a woman's virginity. And if she isn't a virgin, she's to be brought to the door of her father's house and stoned by the men of the city. Or if a woman is married and raped by a man other than her husband, both the man and the woman are to be stoned. The woman because she should have cried out for help. Unless it happens outside of the city, only the man is stoned because no one could have heard the woman scream.

This is part of Joseph's context. This is part of his dilemma. As a righteous man, what he "should" do is pretty clear. Perhaps stoning was no longer the punishment, but Joseph knew

that if he did what he “should” do, Mary would be disgraced, publicly disgraced. And he was unwilling for that to happen.

Joseph was unwilling for Mary to be disgraced. So instead of doing what he should have done, he came to the decision to secretly dismiss her. Now, I think it’s important for us to pause and remember that Joseph and Mary’s engagement is not the same as a 21<sup>st</sup> century engagement. Marriages were legal, contractual arrangements made between families. Couples didn’t get married because they had fallen in love. There wasn’t a romantic dinner where Joseph got down on his knee and asked Mary to be his wife. This engagement was a contractual, legally binding arrangement that had already been made. It would be no small feat to “dismiss her quietly.”

But after pondering his options, dismissing her in secret is what Joseph decided to do. And his decision speaks volumes about the righteousness and justice of Joseph.

For all practical purposes, Joseph is the wronged party here. Mary is no longer a virgin. She “should” be punished. And public disgrace is the proper punishment. That’s the punishment that the community believed God wanted. But it isn’t what Joseph wanted. He was unwilling for her to be punished. Of course continuing the engagement into marriage wasn’t an option, so he would secretly dismiss her. This word, *dismiss*, also means divorce. The legal contract would be ended. But this word also means *release...and forgive*. By secretly dismissing Mary, he was releasing her...he was forgiving her. Forgiving what she owed him. Forgiving her for ruining the plans his family had made for his life. Forgiving the punishment she should have received. Forgiving the consequences of what he was sure was sin.

Joseph is not only a righteous man, he is incredibly gracious and generous. His willingness to release Mary is an act of mercy. His willingness to forgive her debt—the debt

she owed to him and to his family—his willingness to forgive her debt is a light shining into the darkness of our world. It is a light of love.

The righteousness and justice of Joseph isn't bound by his community's practices and traditions, by the laws that have been handed down through the patriarchal lineage. No. His righteousness has been formed by a God who loves human beings—with all our flaws and through all our scandals. A God who chooses forgiving love rather than collecting what is owed. A God who chooses merciful love rather than punishment and pain. A God who chooses gratuitous love and scandal rather than banishing anyone to the margins of disgrace and shame.

Joseph has been formed by the love of this God. And God-who-is-love chose this Joseph to be the father of Jesus, the child who was fathered by the Holy Spirit. The child who would be named Jesus...who would liberate the people from their sins...who would release the people their sins. Who, instead of collecting what was owed for sins committed, would forgive.

So when an angel of God came to Joseph in his dream and revealed to him the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph said Yes.

Joseph's Yes to God is consent formed by the lights of hope and peace and joy. And love. His Yes is an act of faith. His trust in God is absolute. When Joseph says Yes to God, he is also saying Yes to Mary. Yes, to joining her in marriage, but also and more importantly, Yes to joining her life. In an act more intimate than any marriage bed, Joseph said Yes to joining Mary and sharing the shame of this scandalous pregnancy. Saying Yes to joining her as together they released their lives and their futures to bind themselves to the Spirit of God and to the lives and futures that God was creating for them.

No romantic love is sturdy enough to say Yes to God when our lineage and the world around us is saying No! Joseph's Yes to God was possible because he understood himself to be loved by God. This is the foundation and center of Joseph's righteousness. It is an identity and a righteousness formed not by external rules or by genealogy, but by eternal love, love that releases, love that forgives. Joseph, the righteous man, has been seeking the face of God, turning, letting himself be turned so that the face of God could shine on him. And God's eternal love took root in Joseph, growing into a sturdy, durable love, powered by God's Spirit stirring and breathing in him.

Joseph's Yes to becoming the father of Jesus, the Christ, was only the first of many Yeses to come. For all the paternity and patriarchy that brought Joseph to this point, he knew and understood that the future of this child wasn't his determine or control, but God's.

As Joseph said Yes, he sensed deep within his being that the prophecy was already being fulfilled: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." With his Yes, Joseph was already experiencing God with him. And when Emmanuel is born, when God is with us, we too have the power to say Yes. Yes to joining ourselves with God's love...God's forgiving love. And rather than keeping our scandals a secret, we tell our stories to each other, knowing that God is with us in our scandals. God will never dismiss us to the margins of disgrace, but will always be with us, loving us.

May the light of God's love shine on us. And may we say Yes to God's love...Yes to joining ourselves—our lives and our stories—with the story of Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus the Christ, Emmanuel. May we know God-with-us.