

Every third year in the lectionary, the spotlight shifts from Mary, or Elizabeth, or John the Baptist, and shines the light on Joseph. We don't know much about Joseph from scripture; however, what we do know is that he is "a quiet, unassuming descendant of the House of David" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). We know this not only from our scripture reading today but also right before today's reading at the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. There we find Jesus' genealogy, which locates Jesus' origins in the story of God's dealings with God's people (Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*). 17 verses of "begats" that trace the lineage of Jesus all the way back to Abraham in the Old Testament until his father Joseph. "Matthew wants to show us by this pedigree that Jesus is deeply rooted in the royal line of ancient Israel, for all the ancestors of Jesus are kings in Jerusalem" (Walter Brueggemann, *Collection of Sermons, Vol. 2*). I used to fall asleep when all those names were read or I read them or I just plain ole skipped right over them- 42 generations in 17 verses of names that are known and unknown, pronounceable and unpronounceable. I will tell you though that genealogies fascinate me more and more the older I get, especially the ones in the Bible. Back to Joseph, who carries this royal line...the few times Joseph is mentioned in Scripture he never speaks – not with words. Not once. As I said last week, the ambiguity or the unanswered questions leave us room to wonder what was Joseph really like? How else did he respond to this visit from the angel and this crazy news? Before I get ahead of myself, let us first pray. **PRAY.**

READ Matthew 1:18-25.

In the past, the first question I have asked is how is Jesus the son of David when God acts through the Holy Spirit (by whom Mary conceives) and Joseph isn't really Jesus' biological father? This baby is from the Holy Spirit. Jesus is obviously not a physical descendant of Abraham and David but related by God's action. His conception by the Holy Spirit set him apart from ordinary humans, and words of prophecy declare him as the one who will save his people (*CEB Study Bible*). Just to be clear- it is God, not Joseph and Mary, who begins the story. "What matters is the divine purpose for this yet unborn child" (Carter). This story is also a fulfillment of Isaiah 7. Matthew loves to quote the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah tells about a young woman- perhaps a virgin- who will birth this new baby, the one we celebrate at Christmas (Brueggemann). But back to Joseph- I'd like to spend some time wondering a little about him today. By his very silence, Joseph invites us to wonder at it all.

Joseph's dream is the first of five in a series. Notice that his dream takes place at night when he is probably more relaxed, with his guard down. And what a mouthful from this angel! It's interesting that the angel speaks in a dream, not when Joseph can be awake and in more control. Also notice that "the expectation of Jesus is outside all of our categories, given by God's rule in God's own way. Our way in response to this text is not to explain; it is, rather, to be dazzled that at Christmas something happens beyond all of our calculations. We can also set aside a lot of speculation about biological transactions and notice, rather, that newness comes, according to our faith, when God's Spirit stirs beyond everything that has

been settled. The healing, transforming, creating breath of God has caused a new baby who will change everything among us” (Brueggemann). And back to Joseph. You see how easily it is to sideline Joseph in this story, as if he doesn’t play a role?! Yet, Matthew reminds us that “in fact, Joseph’s role in Jesus’ arrival is pivotal. It is his willingness to lean into the impossible, to embrace the scandalous, to abandon his notions of holiness in favor of God’s messy plan of salvation, that allows the miracle of Christmas to unfold. As Matthew makes clear, the Messiah must come from the house and lineage of David” (Thomas).

Matthew reports that Joseph is engaged to Mary at this point in the story. He is betrothed. Betrothal in those days meant that while the woman still lived with her parents or guardians, there were no sexual relations until marriage. However, once betrothed you were addressed as married, hence in today’s passage where we are told that Joseph was her husband, but he wasn’t yet. With a betrothed couple, like in marriage, promises had been made and promises were expected to be kept. Well there were two serious breaches to the agreement and thus to deeply held community values here: one: Mary’s becoming pregnant out of wedlock and two: Mary allegedly being unfaithful to her betrothed. “Pregnant and betrothed, Mary is already- by conventional cultural standards- on the social, economic, and religious margins” (Carter). Needless to say, the angel dropped a big ole mic in Joseph’s dream, upending this quiet carpenter’s good life and reputation. I imagine that Joseph awoke immediately after his dream. Wouldn’t you?! The little that we know about Joseph is that he is a righteous man. As a

carpenter, I imagine he paid close attention to detail and was careful to measure twice and cut only once. Just one little mistake, a tiny error in calculation and the whole thing would be off. Matthew paints the picture of a God-fearing carpenter who wakes up one morning only to find his whole world shattered; completely turned upside down- his fiancé is pregnant, and he is not the father. Joseph also knows right away that there are no good options from which to choose. “If he calls attention to Mary’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she might be stoned to death. If he divorces her quietly, she could be reduced to begging or prostitution to support herself and the child” (Thomas). Joseph was righteous which implies **his conformity** to the law of God, the supreme standard of Jewish holiness. Surely, Joseph was torn between care for Mary’s dignity, his own dignity and a strict adherence to the law- torn between a love of Mary and a love of God, and his own confusion over it all. If Joseph stays with Mary, he will forever be marked by the scandal of Mary’s illicit pregnancy, and by her ridiculous and even blasphemous claim that the baby’s daddy is somehow God (Thomas). Joseph flat out experiences the tension between the prevailing understanding of God’s commandments and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. Poor Joseph. Imagine becoming the talk of the town – and not in a good way- when all you want is an ordinary, quiet, uncomplicated life. Is that too much to ask? How heartbreaking for Joseph – the quiet, careful, righteous one to be treated so shamefully. Surely, he was filled with anger at being made a fool by a woman promised. Though Matthew doesn’t tell us what Joseph was feeling, we must not overlook the humanness of the man or the reality of the context. Let us not make the

grave mistake of sanitizing Joseph's consent, distorting his humanity when we assume that his acceptance of God's plan came easily, when we hold ourselves at arm's length from his humiliation and doubt (Thomas). We dishonor and discredit him not to sit a moment with the shame he must have felt and the anger and hurt that must have accompanied it. In his anguish, Joseph, rightfully so, does not believe Mary's story until the angel from the Lord tells him to do so.

We're told that just as Joseph had all of this swirling in his head and heart, that's when the angel appeared to him in a dream. The first words out of the angel's mouth, after calling Joseph by name as well as who his people were, was "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit" (v. 20). Do not be afraid- words we hear over and over again in scripture. Easier said than done. God is asking Joseph and Mary to live a difficult existence by going against the grain of their culture. "In choosing Joseph to be Jesus' earthly father, God led a 'righteous' man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God's call required Joseph to reorder everything he knew about fairness, justice, goodness and purity. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman whose story he didn't fully understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who was not his son. In other words, God's messy plan of salvation required quiet, cautious, calculated Joseph to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most- the fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable" (Thomas). Well, I don't know about you but what a

refreshing relief! Joseph's story brings me hope, as I cannot relate very well to a person who jumps right into obedience without question. I can relate though to a person who struggles. Can't you?! Let's take a quick glance at some of the names on Joseph's family tree. "Abraham, the patriarch who abandoned his son, Ishmael, and twice endangered his wife's safety in order to save his own hide. Jacob, the trickster usurper who humiliated his older brother. David, who slept with another man's wife and then orders that man's murder to protect his own reputation. Tamar, who pretended to be a sex worker, and Rahab, who was one. And these are just a few examples of Jesus' lineage. See a pattern here? Messiness? Complication? Scandal? Sin? How interesting that God, who could have chosen any genealogy for his Son, chose a long line of brokenness, imperfection, dishonor, and scandal. The perfect backdrop, I suppose, for his beautiful works of restoration, healing, hope, and second chances" (Thomas).

Don't be afraid! Like Joseph, perhaps if we are to enter into God's messy story, these are the very words we need to hear. So..."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 righteousness. 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 own spotless reputation. Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible" (Thomas).

At the end of the dream, the angel gives Joseph two names for the baby we celebrate at Christmas. First, "Jesus for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). "The Hebrew name Jesus is the verb 'save.' He will save from sin and guilt..death and destruction...despair and hopelessness...poverty, sickness and hunger" (Brueggemann). And the second name the angel gave for the baby Jesus? Emmanuel. God with us. The same name Isaiah had mentioned. Friends, when our world can feel unsavable, there is this baby named 'Save' and when our world and lives often feel abandoned, there is this baby named 'God with us'" (Bruggemann). So...as followers of "Save from all that kills" and "God with us," "Don't be afraid of the mess. The mess is the place where God is born" (Thomas). Thanks be to God! Amen.