

In the final verse of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, we sang “What can I give him, poor as I am?” I always wondered about the line “If I were a wise man, I would do my part.” What part would that be? What is our part as God’s Spirit breaks once again into our world at Christmas?

This morning’s reading from the gospel of Matthew lifts up the part that Joseph was called to do in the fulfillment of God’s promises and purposes. We might sing: “If I were a carpenter, I would give him a cedar wood cradle,” but God called Joseph to give a much greater gift.

First, does anyone happen to remember how the gospel of Matthew begins? Probably not, for who wants to read in Worship the genealogy of Jesus, 16 verses of names covering 32 generations? And yet, that is what precedes our gospel reading. Nothing about an angel visiting Mary, nothing about a stable or shepherds or *Glory to God in the highest heaven*, the elements of the Christmas story that we celebrate from the gospel of Luke. I have one nativity in which it’s hard to tell which figure is Joseph; we don’t pay much attention to him, do we?

Well Matthew does! With regard to Jesus’ birth, Matthew proclaims who this child is and will be for all time: Messiah---Emmanuel---Jesus. The Hebrew people have been waiting for the Messiah since Abraham first responded to God’s call; Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises that God made through prophets like Isaiah. Joseph, a descendent of King David, has no minor role in this drama, but rather a crucial role.

Matthew’s genealogy identifies this child as the culmination of the hopes of Israel and the God’s dreams for all nations. We hear the names of fathers and sons, from Abraham to David, from Josiah to Zerubbabel, and surprisingly, four women as well: Rahab, Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba. All of these people remind us of the wonderful and often troubling stories of families throughout the Old Testament, the imperfect and unlikely people who have been chosen to do their part in the unfolding of God’s purposes.

Yes, family life can be very messy. Abraham rejects his oldest son, Ishmael; Jacob deceives his father and steals from his brother. Joseph’s brothers throw him down a well, and David has the husband of Bathsheba killed. Yikes!

And yet—Matthew tells us, all of these people have their place in the new creation of Jesus. Susan Andrews writes: “It is out of a ghastly and goodly heritage that Jesus is born.” And so, this genealogy ends with these names: “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”

We may notice that Joseph is not called the father of Jesus, but we are still pumped to hear more about this good news. But what do we hear instead? Wonder and scandal! Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit, and Joseph is going to call off the engagement and dismiss Mary quietly!

Wait, what about the hymn we just sang: *Gentle Joseph, Joseph dear, stay with me for the baby's near?* I guess this hymn should have come after the gospel reading; we kind of jumped ahead to the good news before dealing first with the crisis in this relationship.

I think that we would all agree that Joseph is faced with a no-win situation. He is a righteous man who follows the law of God and protects the honor of his family. He must be struggling with all sorts of questions: "What should I do? How must I follow the laws of God and man? How can I believe Mary?"

This was most likely an arranged marriage, but Joseph cares about Mary's reputation as well as his own. So, he makes the decision to go against the social convention and expectation of a public proceeding to end the betrothal, the equivalent of a divorce. If he does this, however, Mary will not only be ostracized but also in danger of a much harsher punishment, even death by stoning. Joseph's decision may be "righteous" in terms of the laws of God and men, but the consequences for Mary are horrible. Does Joseph really want Mary to be punished so severely?

In the gospels, believers must struggle between the generally accepted understanding of God's will and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. Wonder and scandal. Mystery and controversy. It isn't only in the town of Nazareth or in Matthew's community, that such agonizing moral dilemmas arise. We must wrestle with hard questions when the command to love another seems to conflict with some of God's laws. It is very difficult when what we've been taught to do is at odds with what our hearts are telling us is the right thing to do.

So, God sends an angel to Joseph in a dream, appealing to the longing and mercy in his heart, bypassing reason, cultural expectations and religious understandings of what it means to be righteous. The angel's first words are: *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.* In the dream, the son is given a name, a life's purpose, the support of the prophet Isaiah, and the title of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Rev. Kate Huey describes Joseph as a man who wants to be observant and faithful to God's Law but whose heart stays open to compassion and mercy. Now he asks: What is my heart telling me? He listens to this holy dream that answers all his questions.

Do you reflect upon your dreams, your nighttime and daytime dreams, as the voice of God speaking to you?

Susan Andrews describes the righteousness of Joseph as having to do "with trusting intuition and imagination--being in right relationship with the dreams of God." The figure of Joseph offers us a broader understanding and example of righteousness, as "faithfulness shaped by compassion." And this kind of righteousness can strengthen us to do what we feel is right, in spite of our fears about what may lie ahead.

We know that in our world today honor killings of women continue. We know that rigid religious beliefs, fear and hatred, along with political and business agendas, too often neglect or destroy compassion.

And yet, as the genealogy of Jesus reminds us, it is God who has always worked through messy human relationships. What emerges are God's wisdom and care that open the way for a new start, for repentance, forgiveness, and transformation. Ishmael doesn't die in the wilderness and Isaac isn't sacrificed; Jacob is reconciled with his brother Esau, and Bathsheba gives birth to Solomon. It is the Spirit of God that comes upon Mary and who reveals to Joseph what a righteous faith is all about. It is God who relieves our fears and give us guidance, if our hearts stay open to the spirit of love that lives within us. God helps Joseph, husband of Mary, just as God guided that other Joseph of long ago, through holy dreams in which they both trusted.

At that time, the act of a father giving a name to his son made the relationship official and legal, as well as upholding the honor and lineage of the family. Joseph names this baby Jesus, "the one who saves."

And so yes, we can sing: *Gladly, Mary, Mary mine. I will cradle the child divine. Here will heaven and earth combine, for you will bear God's child, O dearest Mary.*

Jesus, the one who saves, and Emmanuel, God-with-us. The wonder and scandal, the pain and joy of it all can prompt us to ask: What can we give him, poor as we are? What will our part be this Christmas?

I think that our call as a church has never been stronger. I feel that now is the time to discuss and reflect upon what difference Jesus' birth will make in our lives now and in the coming new year. Fear and anger, intolerance and the lack of compassion seem to be on the rise among humans, both near and far. It is time to renew our commitment to God's mission and dreams of a world where love and justice reign.

What can we give? We can ask tough questions. We can pay close attention to signs of the opportunities that God is offering us: to speak healing words, engage in daily acts of compassion, challenge unkind behavior, and protest against injustice. Like Mary and Joseph, we have many fears, but this is the perfect time of year to risk jumping into the birth of Jesus and rebirthing ourselves as God-bearers, bearers of God's dreams.

As the Christian church, we will do our part.

We will use our gifts of intuition and imagination, trusting that God's realm is unfolding and will continue to unfold. We will embody faithfulness shaped by compassion. We will bear witness to the love of God that continues to work through wonderful and imperfect human communities. What we can, we give, to God and others. We will give our hearts.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Resources and Notes

Huey, Rev. Kate. "Sermons Seeds," www.ucc.org. The quotations from Susan B. Andrews (in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*) are from Rev. Kate Huey's commentary/sermon

on the Matthew reading, December 18, 2016. I am indebted to Rev. Kate Huey and Susan Andrews, for their words and ideas, especially on the Matthew genealogy, the theme of righteousness, and the messiness of families. The title of this sermon is from the quote by Susan Andrews.

Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, Commentaries on Matthew 2: 18-25. Aaron Klink: “Behind the pretty nativity scene lies both a wonder and a scandal”

Commentaries and sermons on lectionary readings for December 18, 2016

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