

“What Would You Do?”

“She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

What would you do?

- You find a wallet filled with cash on the sidewalk that has no identification inside.
- You see a child running toward a mall escalator while his mother is inside a store.
- You notice a stray dog wandering in your neighborhood in the dead of winter.

What would you do?

All of us would hope that we would do the right thing if we were confronted with these or similar situations. We would turn the wallet into the police so that they might use their forensic tools to identify its owner; we'd run to prevent the child from hurting himself while at the same time trying to get the parent's attention; we'd take the dog in out of the cold, feed it, and try to find its home. But until we actually find ourselves in these circumstances, none of us really knows how we might react to a surprising, unexpected situation that compels us to respond.

Today, the question that our Gospel lesson asks is similar: What would we do if we were in Joseph's place and had to make the decision that is before him? Matthew doesn't tell us much about Joseph before we meet him in this story; the only precious mention of him is in the opening genealogy of this Gospel, where we learn that Joseph is the son of Jacob and *“the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”* (Matthew 1:16). This genealogy traces Joseph's lineage back through the generations to King David and further back to Abraham, the father of the people of Israel. We also learn at the beginning of our Gospel lesson that Joseph is engaged to Mary, which at the time was a binding arrangement between people already legally considered to be married. Engagement was a formal contractual matter, usually decided on by the two fathers in questions (an arranged marriage), the first stage of marriage that was completed months later by the formal wedding ceremony. Unfaithfulness in an engagement was considered adultery, and could only be resolved by death or divorce. The Torah was quite strict about the consequences of such infidelity within an engagement:

- “If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” – Deuteronomy 22:23-24.

By Matthew's time, the harshness of this sentence had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating.

When Joseph, who Matthew describes as *“a righteous man,”* finds out that Mary is pregnant, all he can assume is that she has committed adultery with another man. A “righteous man” was one who lived according to the Torah, the supreme Jewish standard of holiness; therefore Joseph's response was to divorce Mary, which *“showed a sensitivity to Israel's understanding of the sanctity of marriage required by God's Law, since her loss of virginity might have been considered adultery.”* (Raymond Brown). But even though he must have been extremely hurt by what he assumes was Mary's infidelity, Joseph was also sensitive to the protective character of the Torah and was *“unwilling to expose her to public disgrace”* which would have happened had he insisted on a public trial. Therefore, Joseph decides to *“dismiss her quietly,”* at the same time also dismissing all of his

hopes and dreams for his life with his bride, their future children, and the life they would have shared as a family.

But before Joseph can go through with this discrete divorce, *“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.”* (1:20). The words “do not be afraid” are typical of angelic revelations throughout the Bible:

- “And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.’” – Genesis 21:17.
- “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.’” – Luke 1:30.
- “But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.’” – Matthew 28:5-6a.

The angel gives Joseph an explanation for Mary’s pregnancy, announcing the divine act that has already occurred, and that Mary *“will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* (1:21). Patterned on angelic revelations to biblical fathers-to-be, this is a communication of a divine plan for both the conception and the future of the infant.

- “... your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.” – Genesis 21:19.
- “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth ... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” – Luke 1:13-14, 16-17.

As the angel of the Lord commanded both Abraham and Zechariah to give their sons specific names, so is Joseph commanded to name his son “Jesus” (*Yeshua*, also the root of “*Joshua*”), which was a popular name in the First Century. But what was unusual in each of these situations is that these fathers are going against convention practice in which a first-born son took his father’s name; when Elizabeth announces that her son *“is to be called John,”* their neighbors and relatives respond with bewilderment: *“None of your relatives has this name.”* (Luke 1:60-61). Joseph is to give his son a common human name, a sign that unites the child with all human beings; but it is also a name with great significance, since *Yeshua* means “God saves”; for indeed, *“he will save his people from their sins.”*

The child’s identity is confirmed to Joseph and Matthew’s readers when the Evangelist states that *“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.’”* (1:22-23). This passage from Isaiah 7:14 is quoted to *“provide proof that his surprising and unprecedented event was, in fact, a fulfillment of Scripture and all along a part of God’s plan for human redemption.”* (Ben Witherington). It was also a part of the early church’s confession of faith in Jesus as the Incarnate Word, *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14). Jesus is the one whose teachings astounded the crowds, *“for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes”* (7:29); it was also the assurance that the risen Christ gives his disciples that *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (28:20).

- “The enduring presence of God’s Spirit in the risen Jesus was already a reality at the conception of Jesus; what was made known by angelic revelation to Joseph, the just Jew, would be made known to all the nations until the end of the world by the apostolic preaching and teaching.” – Brown.

As astounded as the message of the angel to Joseph is, its fulfillment depends on Joseph's response. Throughout the Bible, men and women are called by God to be the instruments through which God's Will is to be accomplished; but God never forces or compels a person to do so against their will, but also gives them the choice as to whether or not they will obey the commands of God. When Abram was called by God to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1), Abram had to choose between trusting in God's Word or remaining where he was, where all was safe and familiar. Because "Abram went, as the LORD had told him" (12:4), God would use him to become the ancestor of the great nation through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (12:3). When Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel who announces to her that "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luke 1:31), the young woman has a choice as to whether she will obey the angel's command – with all of the risk and uncertainty that came with it – or remain in her safe world with her plans for marriage and family. Because Mary declares that "here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38), Mary becomes the mother of the child who is Lord and Saviour of all.

- "Miriam [the Hebrew name for Mary] responded intelligently to the angel. She trusted God and let the Lord invade her deepest self in a physical way that has never been asked of anyone else, before or since. She is unique because she bore the Son of God in her body, and brought him to birth. Her 'let it be' is both willing, active assent and humble submission. In this he is a true daughter of the covenant. She agrees to walk the way through the wilderness, although her betrothal promises to Joseph will now be called into question, and her honour, and even her life itself, are under threat." – Jenny Robertson, *Mary of Nazareth*.

While none of Joseph's words are recorded in Scripture, his response is one of faith that trusts in God even in the midst of uncertainty and risk: "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." (1:24-25). Not only does he obey the angel's commands in taking Mary as his wife and naming the child, but he does even more than the angel commanded in that he had no sexual relations with Mary until the child was born, so that there would be no doubt that the child "is from the Holy Spirit." In naming the child "Jesus," Joseph both gives up the right to sire his own first-born son (which in a patriarchal culture was crucial to the family line and property transfer) and publicly declares that the child born of Mary is his own son, even though he was not the biological father. According to rabbinic teaching, "if a man says, 'This is my son,' he is to be believed." Joseph gives such an acknowledgment by naming the child; thus he becomes the legal father of Jesus. The child therefore becomes a full child of Joseph lineage, a Son of David who will be the fulfillment of the covenant God made with this ancestor of the everlasting rule of the descendants of David:

- "Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house in my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." – 2 Samuel 7:11-13, 16.

Because of his decision to trust in God's Word in spite of all that he had first assumed about Mary's pregnancy, "the hero of Matthew's infancy story is Joseph, a very sensitive Jewish observer of the Law, who is brought through God's revelation to accept Jesus, saving him from destruction." (Brown). Joseph will once again display his heroism when an angel again appears to him in a dream and commands him to "get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." (2:13). The reaction of King Herod, who had no legitimate claim to the throne of Israel, to the wise men's inquiry as to "where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:2) was one of fear: "he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." (2:3). For a despot like Herod, the solution to this perceived threat was to slaughter "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" (2:16).

This slaughter of the Holy Innocents (which is remembered on December 28) is a reminder to us that the news of the birth of Jesus was not received as good news by everyone, that even though *“the light has come into the world ... people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”* (John 3:19-20). But even Herod’s darkest depravity could not destroy the light that shines in the presence of the son of Joseph, the heroic disciple who protects his son until the angels assures him that *“those who are seeking the child’s life are dead”* (2:20); he then settles with his family *“in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’”* (2:23).

- “Thus Joseph stands, at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, as a model of what Matthew hopes for all disciples – indeed, for each reader of the Gospel. Joseph is already facing the ‘you have heard that it was said but I say to you’ tension that will be displayed in the Sermon on the Mount – the tension between the prevailing understanding of God’s commandments and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. By Joseph’s decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, he is already living the heart of the law and not its letter, already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom of God. In a difficult moral situation, he attends to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his previous understanding of God’s will in favor of this word from the living and saving God.” – M. Eugene Boring.

What would you do?

It is highly unlikely that any of us will encounter a situation like Joseph’s, in which an angelic visit completely transforms our lives and the lives of all persons. But we all open ourselves to the possibility that something unexpected and unplanned might happen every time we pray *“thy will be done.”* In this petition of the Lord’s Prayer, we are committing ourselves to setting aside our own agendas and desires so that we might be the “earthen vessels” through which God’s Will is accomplished. We seek to be as faithful to God’s call as were his mother Mary, his father Joseph, his Twelve Disciples, and all the faithful who have greeted our Lord at Christmas and answered his call to discipleship.

- “In fellowship with Jesus his followers have surrendered their own wills completely to God’s, and so they pray that God’s will may be done throughout the world... God’s name, God’s kingdom, God’s will must be the primary object of Christian prayer. Of course it is not as if God needed our prayers, but they are the means by which the disciples become partakers in the heavenly treasure for which they pray.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

As we prepare to gather at the Manger this Christmas, we give thanks for those who were called by God to be the means through which the Saviour of the Nations was born. We give thanks for the faithfulness of Mary, for the courage of Joseph, for the enthusiasm with which the shepherds came to Bethlehem to share the good news that the angels sang, for the Magi who will embark on a long journey to worship at the feet of the newborn king, and for all whose faithfulness has made it possible for us to continue to celebrate Christ’s birth. We may not know what we would do if we were in their position, but may we pray that Christ’s presence will inspire the same faithfulness, courage, and enthusiasm in God’s people today, so that we may be bold in sharing the good news to all people that *“to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”* Amen.