

The Basilica of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome is a minor basilica dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The church's modest exterior can be misleading. If you didn't know what was inside, you might never suspect. But there among the spectacular artwork inside the church is a world-famous masterwork of Baroque sculpture: Bernini's "Ecstasy of St. Theresa" that captures a vision of St. Theresa of Avila with an angel poised to pierce her with an arrow and fill her with the love of God.

There is another sculpture that doesn't get anywhere near the same popular attention: Guidi's "The Dream of St. Joseph." Guidi's statue, pictured on the front of your bulletin, was inspired by this passage from Matthew, a reading that is as full of unexpected treasures as the Basilica of Santa Maria della Vittoria.

Matthew begins the story of Jesus' birth in a way that might lead us to expect certain details: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." Luke's story that we hear on Christmas tells of a young woman who travels from Nazareth to Bethlehem with her husband, with whom she was expecting a child. The angel in Luke's story who appears to Mary also appears to shepherds, and we focus on a baby born in a manger.

But the writer of Matthew's Gospel is up to something different. "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way," it begins. And then, despite our expectations, Matthew does not focus on a baby at all, but tells a story about Joseph. Joseph is a strict observer of Jewish law. He is also in right relationship with God. We see some of his character in his decision to "dismiss" Mary "quietly."

Now, "dismissing her quietly" is a heavily domesticated version of a harsh reality facing this just and righteous man. You see, in first century Palestine, an engagement was not the romantic prelude to marriage. In the ancient world, marriages were agreements between two families, not two individuals. The families set the bride and groom apart for each other, which was the betrothal, the first phase of the marriage.

During that time, the patriarchs of each family made offers of gifts and services, while the matriarchs negotiated what amounted to a property contract. Once the two patriarchs ratified contract negotiations publicly, the bride left her family home and went to live with her husband, and that completed the marriage process.

During the betrothal phase, sex was forbidden. That doesn't mean it never happened, of course, but Jewish law considered it a form of adultery, which was a capital crime punishable by stoning. In cultures where honor killing has been and is still practiced, the reasoning is that when a person commits a sexual impropriety, they have brought dishonor upon their family and the community.

Matthew tells *us* that God had something to do with Mary's pregnancy before Joseph learns that. So without knowing what we know, Joseph had to decide: Should he, a just man who takes God's law seriously, *disobey* the law to keep Mary's pregnancy a secret? Or should he reveal the situation to the community and expose Mary to stoning? Before the angel came, Joseph decides to preserve Mary's life instead of clinging to his obedience to the law. Surely, a troubling decision. Even so, Joseph chooses a quiet divorce with mercy, perhaps hoping that the actual father of the child that Mary carries will step up and do the honorable thing.

And that, of course, is what happens, but in a most unexpected way.

Now, in the meantime, Mary has been experiencing her own anxieties. Her pregnancy may not have gone unnoticed by the other women in her village. They would have been curious even if she only missed one or two of the monthly purification rituals required of all non-pregnant Jewish women. She knew that her pregnancy would create problems for Joseph and she was aware of the potential consequences for her own life.

The author of Matthew's Gospel is up to something. The context is set in the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel that comes just before our reading. The entire first chapter of the Gospel, all 17 verses, consists of family history with gripping prose like: "Uzziah was the father of Jotham; Jotham was the father of Ahaz; Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah..." Well, you get the idea. "Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh..." it goes on, covering 42 generations. What a way to open a book! These have to be among the most overlooked verses in all Christian scripture, and yet there is something important here.

Some of the names in this family lineage are exactly what we'd expect – there are kings and notables going all the way back to David and to Israel's ancestor, Abraham. But instead of a spotless roster of royalty, Matthew includes a catalogue of uncommon characters. To include women at all is unusual, so Matthew must have a compelling reason to name these five: Tamar, who pretended to be a prostitute to trick her father-in-law, Judah, into getting her pregnant. Rahab, the harlot of Jericho who helped Joshua's spies. Ruth, who was not Hebrew, but married into the tradition. Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah who

became King David's wife after the king had Uriah killed. And finally, Mary, the mother of Jesus who, according to the Orthodox, is also a descendant from the house of David.

Immediately after this genealogy, comes the first line of our reading: "...the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." Now, there is another word for "birth" that Matthew could have used, but the word chosen is *genesis*. "The *genesis* of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way."

The angel says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid," and then tells this righteous son of the house of David that God is at work. The months leading up to this first dream have been anxiety-filled for both Joseph and Mary. Matthew's angel came in a dream to reassure and reorient Joseph, who will encounter angels in three more dreams before he and new wife and son can get safely to Nazareth.

Finally, we can see that what Matthew hopes to do is to illuminate an awesome truth. He confirms the Jewish experience that God truly is at work in human history, specifically Jewish history. And then the angel of God enlightens Joseph – and you and me – with the truth that, in Jesus the Messiah, God has assumed our humanity. Jesus is not a magic baby or half-man/half-god like so many of the Caesars claimed to be.

Jesus the Messiah, fully Divine and fully human, is *with us*.

The genesis of Jesus the Messiah took place through real people with real challenges and real histories. God didn't choose a flawless royal empress to carry and mother the Christ-child, but a young girl from an obscure village. God didn't choose an impeccable father with scandal-free ancestors to raise Jesus, but a righteous man with real anxieties who wanted to do the right thing and who trusted angelic guidance to make it happen.

Next week, we will have guests at church and some of you may be guests somewhere else. We will hear Luke's beautiful Christmas story – the version that people expect to hear. This week, we heard Matthew's down-to-earth story that leaves room for those in-house details that we might not share with guests.

Like Joseph and Mary, and so many of our ancestors in the faith, many of us are apprehensive – working through grief, health issues or loneliness. "'Tis the season," right? Some of us are working through relationship strains, job insecurities or addictions. This church is looking at genuine financial stresses and so are many of our families.

That's real and that's true.

But there's something larger, something more. God is with us, using our gifts, and blessing us and those around us with God's own presence. God works with and through real people who have real histories. That's why, even with aching hearts or distracted minds, we gather at this table to be refreshed with God's outpouring of hope and peace and joy and love.

That's also real and true. And what's more, God's grace is the ultimate reality and the more encompassing truth.

When we relax our desires for a personal or even a parish future that conforms to our own designs, we open a space ready to receive God's gifts. We can't really know what waits for us ahead, but the light of Advent shines in the darkness of our real and fractured and marvelous lives.

In these last few days of Advent, listen like Joseph for the angelic voice that comes unexpectedly in the darkness. Like Joseph, trust the voice that tells us not to be afraid to move beyond our certainty. Listen for the voice that challenges us to take a leap of faith – to do more than we understand, to paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Heschel, to do more than we understand, so that we might understand more than we do.<sup>1</sup>

We wait in Advent not like children waiting wishfully for Santa, not waiting as we imagine that we are supposed to be or as we hope to be. We wait more like a pregnant woman and an expectant father, with much on our hearts and minds, but waiting hopefully in the increasing awareness that God is with us and still comes in unexpected ways.

We wait in Advent for "Emmanuel," God *really and truly* with us, just as we really and truly are.

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in search of man: a philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.