

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 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.” 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.

Joseph and Mary are way out on some very thin ice here. They have both agreed to a proposal that went against everything proper, prudent and practical in ancient Mediterranean culture.

What God yearns to do with these two is buried in the opening line of the Gospel reading: “Now, the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” The name “Jesus,” or “Yeshua” in Aramaic, means “YHWH saves.” And “the Messiah,” or “the Christos” in Greek, is a *title*, not a last name. The title means “the Anointed One.”

And now you can hear a central theme for the entire Gospel: “The genesis of the one we call ‘YHWH saves through this Anointed One’ took place in this way.” That’s the scope of the project that God has invited Mary and Joseph into.

The readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent in two of the three years of the lectionary cycle focus on Mary. And once every three years, like this year, we turn our attention to Joseph.

Joseph was a righteous Jew. He was righteous, that is, not *self*-righteous. He was merciful, faithful and courageous, and he came from a lineage of notable people going all the way back to David and from there to back to Abraham.

Most folks understandably breeze past the 17 opening verses of the Matthew’s Gospel that lay out Joseph’s family history. There are, however, a few essential theological points implied in this list that provide the context for understanding why God has made this wildly unreasonable request of Joseph and Mary.

Matthew first needs to establish that Jesus is David's heir. Jesus, for Matthew, is a gift from the God of Israel *and* from the Israel of God.

Among the list of kings and other men that includes murderers, tyrants and deserters, Matthew also has theological reasons for listing five women in Joseph's family tree: first, Tamar, who pretended to be a prostitute to trick her father-in-law, Judah, into getting her pregnant. Next up, Rahab, was a Canaanite known as the harlot of Jericho who helped Joshua's spies.

Then comes another Gentile, Ruth, who married into Judaism after a potentially compromising night on a threshing room floor. Matthew next lists "the wife of Uriah" without using her name, Bathsheba, who became David's wife after the king had Uriah killed. Finally, we come to "Joseph the husband of Mary of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

"In this way," Matthew says. In other words, YHWH saves through an heir to the covenant that God made with David; YHWH saves through one who is also the offspring of Gentiles, and of a few people of questionable morality. Through this ancient family, "in this way," God delivers blessings both to and through Jews *and* Gentiles; God works through imperfect women and men, through abnormal and outrageous circumstances, to reunite us, to save us.

Mary and Joseph's situation was more than just socially awkward – it was potentially dangerous. We hear that Mary and Joseph were "engaged" or "betrothed" in English, but only because those are closest words we have to the Hebrew. Words like "dedicated" or "sanctified" may come closer and yet they can all be misleading because our 21st century Western notion of engagement is not the first century Jewish understanding.

The ancient Hebrew wedding was the ritualized removal of a woman from her family that was arranged for property or political advantages. The father of the groom offered gifts or services to the father of the bride, and the women of both families negotiated terms.

Once a contract was approved, the marriage was celebrated in two parts. In the first ceremony, the extended families set the couple apart for each other. And so, according to Deuteronomy, Mary was

Joseph's wife and Joseph was Mary's husband. Dissolving this bond required a religious divorce, called a "get."

Until the second ceremony, the wife was expected to live with her parents or in her own home while the husband prepared for their future life and home together. Even so, a husband was allowed to visit a betrothed wife at her home and so, of course, despite Jewish civil and religious law forbidding physical intimacy in the time between the two parts of the wedding ritual, pregnancies were not entirely unheard of.

I imagine a few over-eager grooms may have claimed some sort of miracle. And knowing what we now know about human biology, one does wonder where the fully human boy Jesus got that Y-chromosome. In any case, rather than working up a lather over what happened physically, our time is probably more productive exploring the situation culturally and spiritually.

We've left poor Joseph still pondering what to do.

And what's on his heart can only be understood in the context of his time and place. By law, Joseph was allowed hold a public inquiry into how Mary got pregnant or to return her to her father, which may well expose her to being cast out of the family or stoned to death. But Joseph was a decent and righteous man – merciful, faithful and courageous – and he refused to expose Mary and her family to shame.

After careful consideration, Joseph decided to be lenient and to dismiss her quietly, that is to say, with as little public gossip as possible, so that he can save as much of her honor as possible. In that way, he can respect Mary and her family, as well as their relationship, without undercutting the intent of Jewish religious laws. Having come to this creative resolution, Joseph goes to sleep.

He moves into a state of consciousness beyond ordinary waking awareness. And in the more expansive subtle state of dreaming, he has a direct, personal experience of the Divine in the form of an angel who explains the situation. Recognizing Joseph's heritage, the angel tells this "son of David" that there is a deeper intention in motion and that Joseph will be a part of it.

His role will be to finalize the marriage, and to shelter Mary and the child given by the Holy Spirit. And then, Joseph is to name the boy Jesus – "YHWH saves" – and by naming him, make him a legal heir to

the house of David, which will eclipse any remaining biological, cultural or traditional concerns, and bring Joseph more honor than he could ever have earned on his own.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel told him to do. Now, when I say: “Joseph woke up,” I mean he did more than rise from biological sleep. Joseph had seen a larger dimension; his awareness was expanded – he woke up to notice the manifestation of God moving through the confusion and bluster of human activity.

In the midst of judgmentalism, gossip and inflexibility, Joseph woke up to the Divine presence flowing beneath and through it all. And that realization enhanced his righteous relationship with God, with his tradition and with his family. Joseph could act on the gift of God’s insight and grow into his role in bringing about the unity that he has tasted.

By following the desire of God, Joseph demonstrated his ability to separate surface appearances from interior intentions. He chose a path of mercy and understanding; a path of love. In his own unique way, he infused the human cultural and religious world around him with God’s transcending love that fulfills the *intent* of those rules without dismissing or breaking them.

And because Joseph woke up, because Joseph listened, because Joseph acted, people will recognize and call his son Emmanuel, which means “God is with us,” until the end of time.

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