

(Matthew 1:18-25 NRSV)

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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## By An Angel, Shame Is Undone

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

Date: December 20, 1998

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Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph isn't usually the most important person in the birth narratives. Indeed, because God is Jesus' real father, Joseph is usually seen as an incidental character in the drama. But in Matthew Joseph is important, and in this morning's reading from that Gospel, the spotlight is on Joseph. Indeed, the story is told from his point of view. This reading, then, makes for an especially interesting exploration, simply because Joseph is the most human character in the story. He's not divine. He's not involved in the divine birth. He's not a wise man from the exotic East. He's not even a star-struck shepherd. Joseph is a man, a human being like you and me, a human being we learn a lot about in this short passage. We learn a lot because the Bible is designed to tell us a lot in a short space.

Anyone who has hefted a Bible lately, even one with those exceedingly thin pages, may find it hard to believe that the Bible is quite succinct. It may seem remarkable to think of this rather ponderous book of a few thousand pages as compact. But, in fact, it is.

The Bible was largely the product of oral transmission, so it needed to be as easy as possible to remember. And when it became written, the means of reproduction were both expensive and time consuming. Papyrus sheets were painstaking to produce. Inks and pens were no simple matter. And every copy of a text had to be hand produced. There were great pressures for an economy of words. And so the people who told the stories of the Bible and who later wrote them down learned to capture a great deal in a few words.

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

In that simple sentence we find Joseph's reaction to finding his fiancé, Mary, to be pregnant. Like good poetry, those few words are left to evoke all the feelings and the details of what happened. They offer a framework for guidance, within which the imagination is invited to work. We know that Joseph's righteousness meant he would have had the right, and apparently the inclination, to call off the engagement. We also know his compassion meant he would do it quietly, so as to

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cause as little public disgrace to Mary as possible. Within that framework we are left to imagine the feelings and the details.

Sometimes, I suspect, because many of us treat the Bible and its main characters so gingerly, we may miss the opportunity to see the real drama these brief but well crafted accounts invite us to. What did it feel like for Joseph to learn that Mary, his fiancé, was pregnant and he wasn't the father?

There is an old English folk carol that gets it right, I think. In *The Cherry Tree Carol* Joseph is thought to be an old man when he becomes engaged to Mary. It goes:

Joseph was an old man,  
An old man was he,  
When he courted Virgin Mary,  
The Queen of Galilee (2x)

As Joseph and Mary  
Walked through an orchard green,  
There were apples and cherries  
Plenty to be seen.

Mary spoke to Joseph  
So meek and so mild  
Joseph, gather me some cherries  
For I am with child.

Then Joseph flew in anger,  
In anger he flew;  
Let the father of the baby  
Gather cherries for you.

Jesus spoke a few words,  
And a very few words spoke he,  
My mother wants some cherries,  
Bend over, cherry tree!

The cherry tree bowed down,  
It was low to the ground;  
And Mary gathered cherries  
While Joseph stood around.

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Then Joseph took Mary  
All on his left knee;  
Saying: Lord have mercy upon me  
For what I have done.

Joseph acts like we would expect him to, and like Matthew's account gives us warrant to. He's a man engaged to be married, who finds out, much to his dismay and surprise, that his intended wife is pregnant, and he knows he's not the father. Before he knows this information, Joseph walks with Mary through orchards. One imagines that Joseph is thinking of their future life of devotion together, living, caring and doing for and with one another. It is a scene known to all lovers as they imagine a blissful life together. In this frame of mind Joseph would be delighted to pick cherries for his beloved. It's a scene right out of high romance. But her announcement that she wants him to pick cherries for her because she is with child abruptly changes the situation. The revelation wounds him deeply. Before their marriage even begins, Joseph finds himself betrayed.

The carol tells us that Joseph flew in anger, and that he shot back at Mary with the bitter remark, "Let the father of your baby gather cherries for you." Later, we can imagine that this kind and gentle man could calm himself and decide to do the right and the good-hearted thing. But his initial reaction to the deep hurt was one of burning anger. Joseph shows us the personal anguish and the resentment that is very human and understandable.

But then comes the real revelation of the story. Occasionally the Christmas Revels include this The Cherry Tree Carol in their production. The song is accompanied by dancers representing Mary and Joseph, and, also, a costumed cherry tree full of cherries. In, what to me is one of the most moving experiences in theater, at the words of Jesus spoken from the womb, the great tree bends over lovingly to offer Mary its cherries, while, as the song says, poor Joseph was left to stand around, embarrassed by his outburst and suspicions.

\*\*\* On Christmas Jesus breaks into the world; God breaks into history. While it is an ancient story, now surrounded by familiar narratives and traditional carols, even like the Cherry Tree Carol. It is not just a story of long ago. It is the moment for which we have been waiting and preparing throughout Advent. It is the moment that God becomes with us, Emmanuel.

And the question on this Christmas Sunday is what does it look like? What does it look like when God all of a sudden shows up as part of our lives?

Every story we have – Herod, the wise men, the shepherds, Mary herself, and this morning, Joseph – every story we have suggests that the arrival of Christmas won't be what we expect. For many of us, who know the stories by heart, who can create a perfect image of the Christmas creche in our minds eye, for many of us, it

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seems as if we know what the arrival of Christmas looks like. And what that may mean is simply that we will look in the wrong places for it.

Christmas arrived for Joseph in an announcement that looked for all the world like a dreadfully humiliating and painful betrayal. And even when the angel came in a dream and explained his shame away, life was still never going to be the same again. The romantic walk through the orchards, the romantic vision of his future marriage – these were gone like a drifting smoke. Christmas for Joseph put his life in upheaval to an extent he could scarcely imagine.

I want to be careful here. It is not the case that every betrayal, every hurt, every painful thing is a sign that God has arrived. While I believe that God is present in all those moments, I am, also, certain that God stands for justice and goodness and against injustice and betrayal. But I am just as sure that when God shows up, it is very likely to be an almost unimaginably disruptive and uncomfortable event. From the moment Mary made her announcement to him, Joseph's life was never to be the same again. At first, when he thought the disruption was brought on by betrayal, he turned to walk away from it. But then, when he found out the disruption was caused by God, he stayed put.

Part of the challenge, then, is sorting out the moments of our discomfort – which are of God? And which are of iniquity? And how do we sort them out knowing that they both will be hard to take?

I don't think we can wrap this in too neat a package. I don't think I can just give you an easy answer to tell you which of the hard things in life are of God and which are of villainy. But a couple of clues are available. First and foremost is the recognition that when God breaks into our universe, it is likely to be tumultuous. If we believe that God's presence comes warm and fuzzy, or just as we expect it to, then we will reject out of hand most of God's activity. God comes to transform the world, not to ratify our versions of it. Second, and related to the first, once we understand that God's arrival is likely to be surprising and not what we expected, then in prayer, or meditation, or visions, or dreams we may hear God helping us to understand, just as the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and helped him understand that God was working in his life. It takes care and practice to learn to listen for the voice of God. For there are many who claim to be speaking for God who do not. Only through integrity and practice can we develop this ability to discern what is truly of God.

In the end, it is the most important work we do. For Christ is breaking into our lives every day. Christ is offering re-formation of our very being every day. By saying, Yes, to the disruptive arrival of God, we enter a new and more fulfilling life. But he is easy to miss, for he is born out back, away from the main thoroughfares, away from where we expect such power to originate. And he is easy to miss, for on

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the surface his arrival may even look like a disgrace. Joseph was saved from missing it all by an angel of the Lord. May we also. Amen.

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