

Joseph's Mystery

Scriptures

Isaiah 7.10-17

Psalm 24

Romans 1.1-7

Matthew 1.18-25

Opening

His story reaches back to the days of Abraham, but when Matthew brings Mary and Joseph on the scene, we're in the middle of crisis. That's how we meet Mary and Joseph, but this isn't how they would have met one another. Parents would have been consulted many years before this betrothal began. Scholars believe Joseph was a bit older than Mary, which explains his absence in the later episodes of Jesus' life. Some early Christian traditions even suggest Joseph had been a widower; that betrothal to Mary would mean his second marriage, though we can't verify that claim from the Bible. In any event, the betrothal was not likely to be a sudden match, not if Jewish custom had been followed. Joseph would offer Mary's father a substantial gift, a sign of his commitment to wed Mary as his wife. Then the betrothal would occur. You may have been to an engagement party, but a betrothal had a bit more heft to it. A betrothal was a legal agreement. The couple were expected to prepare for their wedding, usually a year later, and live in celibacy. You can't just walk away if something goes wrong. Families, village, and the Law of God are involved. You have to have valid, legal reasons to break this arrangement and issue a certificate of divorce.

Well, from Joseph's perspective, something goes terribly wrong. Mary was found to be with child *during* the period of betrothal and Joseph was *not* involved. Joseph has a crisis on his doorstep. This betrothal isn't going to be solemnized in marriage. Carpentry can't have been very lucrative in backwater Nazareth, so that betrothal gift to Mary's father might be lost, too. This is a mess. /

Now the one thing that you must know about Joseph before anything else happens is the quality of Joseph's mercy. A quick glance at Deuteronomy 22 reveals the statute and judgment for a pregnant, betrothed woman. Deuteronomy provided that a betrothed woman who had been unfaithful would be stoned to death alongside the man with whom she committed adultery. But Joseph isn't going there. He doesn't fully know what's happened, but he wants to show Mary mercy. But he's also planning to walk away.

All Joseph needs to resolve this mess is two witnesses. Two Nazarene lads who can witness Joseph's divorce certificate *and* who can keep their mouth shut so Mary will be safe after this ordeal is over. Joseph isn't your average Jewish man. He's more noble and just than the rest, certainly the Pharisees. Remember he's from the house of David. Maybe the dignity of his lineage prevailed upon him. Maybe he remembered the mercy of the Lord offered to David in his failure. Yes, the house of David was meant to be a house of mercy. So Joseph means to be merciful and just toward Mary. He has a good plan, tragic though this crisis is. Joseph is wrestling. His natural father's name was Jacob, but Joseph is wrestling more like his ancient father, Jacob, at Peniel. And then he falls asleep.

Joseph in the Dark

Now while we have Joseph resting asleep for a little while, consider for a moment the mind of Joseph. He is a carpenter, a practical man. A good, merciful, and just man, but not a rabbi, theologian, or philosopher. He works with his hands, the reward for his labors a table, a bench, furniture that he made himself. He can see the outcome of his work. As Dorothy Sayers said, "No crooked table or ill-fitting drawers, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth."

Which makes this story all the more interesting for our practical, work-with-his hands, carpenter in crisis. The work of God within Joseph will not be as tangible as beholding a finished table. In fact, the work of God within Joseph will not happen while he's awake, but when he's asleep.

This is very unnerving for any human being, but I submit it's especially difficult for the masculine soul. Perhaps you've noticed how common it is, though not universal, but how

very common it is that men prefer to be in control. Perhaps you've noticed. How can I do something useful, how can I contribute, if I'm not in control? I don't take away for one moment the presence and glory of God in Joseph's workshop. I simply note that Joseph's carpentry receives a passing reference in Matthew's Gospel, but his foster-fatherhood of Emmanuel is this carpenter's greatest work. And that work begins when he is not in control. It happens when he's asleep. /

At least there's precedence for this. God's greatest work in Adam came when he put Adam to sleep. God took bones and flesh from Adam's side to form Eve. Adam awoke to behold Eve and all he could do was sing, "At last this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Just once I want to hear a live reading of Genesis 2 when Etta James cues up when Adam wakes up.

Back to Adam's great-grandson x 50 or whatever the number is; back to Joseph of Nazareth. Joseph goes to sleep with his plan in place. He's facing fears of social disgrace with Mary's pregnancy, but his plan of compassionate dismissal still gives him some control as he drifts to sleep. Then an angel of the Lord meets him in a dream and God begins working in the dark. When the angel addresses Joseph in the dream, Joseph no longer has control.

Look closely with me at the words of the angel. The angel addresses him in the dream, "Joseph, son of David..." Quick Bible quiz. Do you remember the name of Joseph's biological father? The answer is a few verses above in Matthew's genealogy: Joseph, son of Jacob. Why would the angel address him "Joseph, son of David?"

Carry that question as we read further. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." If there is any refrain we hear from angels throughout Scripture it is this: do not fear. Fear is perhaps, with pride, the most ancient diseases of the soul. Fear drove Adam and Eve into the trees of the garden, hiding from the God who made them in his image. Fear is a response to the threat and experience of shame, it sends us into the dark. When fear grips the soul, we look for a way to save face, to stay in control. And we have at least one option when fear takes hold. We can run and hide. Before Joseph runs and flees this shameful embarrassment, the Holy One sends a messenger in a dream saying, "Do not fear."

With the bold word, "Do not fear," I begin to think again how the angel addressed Joseph. "Joseph, son of David." Placed together, I begin to read this story with a holy imagination. I don't suggest this is what Luke or the angel specifically meant, but I cannot help but think of David's life in the angel's address to Joseph. David, the least of Jesse's boys; Joseph, a son of David, yes, but not one of great consequence, Joseph of Nazareth, a carpenter, not a king. David, the shepherd son who stepped forward when all Israel fled the taunts of Goliath the giant, taking five smooth stones from a stream, needing only one. David, whose very life would be threatened by murderous King Saul; David, who learned that the Lord's deliverance was sufficient from the most vicious enemy. David, the king who wanted to be a builder himself, but God said no, you won't build a Temple for me. That's a task for your son, Solomon, David. Yes, the angel addressed Joseph with this name *while* Joseph was sleeping. Joseph enters a profound mystery, greater than he can comprehend or understand. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife..."

Joseph Awakening after the Dark Night of Faith

That draft certificate of divorce will be torn up and thrown away. Joseph's two witnesses have a clearer schedule now and a lot less awkwardness in Nazareth. But Joseph has no easy way before him when he wakes up. Heaven has guided him in this dream, but that doesn't mean he fully understands "that which is conceived from her is from the Holy Spirit." Who can understand this mystery? Joseph gets an answer of Mary's pregnancy that could have only raised more questions. How is this possible? But I'm not so sure Joseph wrestled with more questions. All we see hereafter is Joseph's obedience. You see, when you encounter the glory of God, rational answers don't really matter so much. Understanding the mystery isn't necessary for obedience. The glory of God, the mystery of God is so much better than knowledge. Give me the beauty of God that overwhelms me. Knowledge so often is about being in control. I'd rather be enfolded in mystery and glory.

So Joseph awakens from this dark night of faith with much still hidden from his understanding. But he enters a mystery with real, practical tasks: take Mary as your wife; name the child, Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Four Heavenly Nights

Yes, Joseph enters a mystery in one memorable night, but the mystery keeps unfolding for Joseph. God doesn't reveal everything at once. The mystery reveals more and more for Joseph. An unusually bright star shines above the place where Mary gives birth to Jesus. That was hidden, but then it happened. Three Magi arrive from the East, kneeling before the infant Jesus, offering him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That was hidden, but then it happened. This is the essence of mystery. God doing more than you can envision. It's the adventure and wonder of obedience.

Read a little further in Matthew 2 and you'll find that Joseph doesn't have one mysterious dream, but four. How do Mary and Joseph know they are no longer safe in Bethlehem? An angel came to Joseph in a second dream. "Rise, 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." Another dream, another call to obedience. Go to Egypt and remain there. How long? Well, indefinitely "until I tell you," the angel says.

Down to Egypt they go, the mystery of God protecting their very lives. Read a little further in Matthew 2 and you see Joseph's third dream. An angel says, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." He had initially planned to return to Bethlehem, but Herod's son is just as dangerous as his father. You can guess what happens next. A fourth dream for Joseph. An angel guides him just like the previous three appearances, "Don't go to Judaea. Head north to Galilee."

Joseph the Dreamer

We speak of this man as Joseph the carpenter, Joseph the earthly father of Jesus. Perhaps we ought to speak of him as Joseph the Dreamer. Makes one think of another Joseph who was a dreamer. You remember Jacob's youngest son, Joseph. He was known for his dreams, he went down to Egypt, he brought his family down to Egypt, protecting them from death, by famine. Joseph's family would leave Egypt guided by the mighty hand of God, too.

You see, Joseph of Nazareth, Mary's husband, not only entered the mystery of God in his dreams. He entered the saga of God's redemption that began with Abraham. Matthew sees something Joseph may not have perceived himself. The dreams, the journey to Egypt, the return to Nazareth, all that happened because God promised the Son of God would fulfill an ancient promise: "Out of Egypt, I have called my son."

We do not have the unique role of Joseph of Nazareth in God's redemption saga, but the pattern of his life and the mystery of God remains the same. We live our ordinary lives, we seek to be faithful in our relationships, in our little communities, but often hidden from our sight is the truth that God is doing much more in and through us than we can see. We are actors in God's cosmic redemption story in more ways than we know. When you receive the mystery of baptism, your life, your story enters the mystery of God's redemption saga. Your life matters to God, to your city, to our ancestors and our descendants.

Joseph and Adam Transfigured

It's a sermon for another day, but I also find in Joseph a figure of transfigured masculinity. Joseph is a figure for all baptized sons and daughters of Jesus, yet he offers a particularly noble image of transfigured masculinity. What do I mean when I say transfigured masculinity? The transformation of masculinity created good in God's image, yet broken by sin, fear, and shame. God did not create Adam for fear and shame, to find his life in knowledge, but these Adam suffered after his sin.

Now consider Joseph. Joseph was tested in the dark night of the soul. Yet Joseph does not exert his will through control or manipulation. He responds in obedience when the Almighty addresses him, summoning him to divine action. **He encounters the Holy One in mystery more than knowledge.** His life was defined by *courageous presence* more than outstanding achievements. /

But remember Joseph didn't abandon the craftsmanship of carpentry. Mystery isn't opposed to practical life. The two were made to be one. Can you imagine Joseph's apprenticeship of Jesus in the Nazareth wood shop after this fourfold encounter with angels in a dream? How could he *not* train the young Jesus in a union of beauty and technical skill?

Closing

To be in God's mystery is beautiful, but isn't exhilarating everyday. "To choose what is difficult all one's days/As if it were easy, that is faith. Joseph, praise." So wrote W.H. Auden of Joseph's mysterious and mundane faith. Mystery sounds great but most days it means waiting in hope, walking by faith, not by sight, living in obedience when life is really hard. But living in the mystery means God *does* speak, he *will* bring moments, few though they be, when the veil is pulled back ever so slightly and we see the beauty and power of God working in our lives, in our time.

So glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we ask or imagine. Glory to Him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.