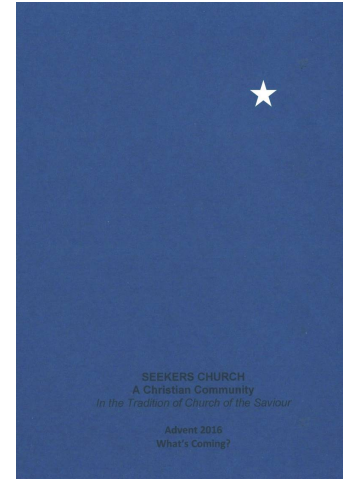


“Joseph’s Question” by Marjory Bankson

December 18, 2016



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Text: Matthew 1: 18-25

If you’ve seen a Christmas pageant, the role of Joseph is probably the most boring of all. He just stands there, itching with straw dust, while Mary and the baby get all the attention from the other characters, including the sheep and camels.

When Joseph stands there with his staff, there is NOTHING to indicate the turmoil it must have taken him to be there; nothing about the question raised by today’s gospel reading: should he quietly dissolve the marriage agreement that he had with Mary? Or go ahead with their plans, even though she has apparently been unfaithful to him – because he KNOWS he’s not the father of this child. Can you imagine his feelings of betrayal? Of being used?

Biblical Story

Matthew lays the story out quite plainly. Joseph is a “righteous man” and is “unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace.” In those days, that might even mean she would be stoned to death for adultery. But Joseph decides to dismiss her quietly – maybe even suggest she go to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, in the hill country. We don’t know what his plans were.

But then Joseph has a dream. An angel, a messenger from God, appears to Joseph and explains Mary's pregnancy as a child of the Holy Spirit, who should be named "Jesus." And on the basis of that dream, Joseph decides to take Mary and the child into his family, to claim the child as his own. And thus Jesus can be born into the house and lineage of David, because Joseph chose to be his earthly father.

This story reminds me of the Old Testament story of Ruth and Boaz, who were the grandparents of King David. Both Joseph and Boaz are presented as men of integrity and kindness, who listen to the leading of God more than to the mores of culture. But this story tells us something else that is equally as important – that lineage is not dependent on blood or custom. In our Christian tradition, belonging is a choice! [PAUSE]

The Gospel of Matthew is the first book of the New Testament because it is a bridge between the Jewish scriptures and what would later be compiled as the New Testament. Of the four gospels, Matthew contains the most references to Jewish writings, like the Isaiah reading for today. The Gospel of Matthew was probably written soon after Jews were expelled from Jerusalem, to a diaspora community in the Syrian city of Antioch, or perhaps Sefhoris, a Greco-Roman port near Nazareth. It's not an eyewitness account of Jesus' birth or his life.

Matthew begins with an interesting listing of Jesus' geneology – to establish the fact that Jesus did indeed belong to the founding family of Israel. The list, grouped into three 14-generation clusters, the list names one father after another: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac, the father of Jacob, and so on.

But the listing, which we have often read on Christmas Eve, includes four Gentile women of questionable reputation, who literally chose into this covenantal lineage. Thus, the genealogy embraces the odd circumstances of Mary's pregnancy without directly saying so. We can simply accept it.

Then Matthew tells us flatly, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah happened this way." And we get to Joseph's question: What to do about Mary's pregnancy. Shelter her or put her out?

My Story

As I pondered Josephs' question, I was suddenly back in the living room with my parents. They were discussing the tragic results of an attempted abortion when I walked into the room. My dad, who was the county coroner at the time, had just returned from the mortuary, where her body had been taken. The girl had been a little older than I was, but not much. My dad looked up at me and said quietly, "If you should ever be in that situation, don't be afraid to come home. Don't ever try to end a pregnancy like this." I was sixteen at the time, and felt enormous gratitude for his assurance of their love and support, even if I got pregnant. That was about the worst thing that could have happened in our household.

I'm guessing that assurance would not have been the case in his own home.

My dad grew up in a violent family, where his parents argued and fought all the time. My grandfather was a carpenter, and my grandmother, a seamstress who worked from home in their Dutch immigrant community. As the older brother, dad focused on his studies and did his chores, caring for a large barn full of chickens. His younger brother focused on sports, and he often fought with his father, sometimes with their fists. When my dad wanted to go to college, his father disowned him, sneering at his desire for more schooling. But with the encouragement of his mother (who had just a fifth grade education), he went anyway. He later worked his way through medical school, waiting on tables in a fraternity house for food. You can probably imagine what it took to make it through, during the Depression, with no help from home. He was 30 when he finally finished.

His brother, who was six years younger, began drinking in college after his girlfriend died of a botched abortion. Both men married, served in the Pacific during World War II, and settled down to separate lives after the war, one in Sacramento and the other, my dad, in Bellingham, Washington.

My dad was always strict, but fair. He expected us to be responsible and do our best to help others, as he did. When his temper rose, he left the house to propagate his holly trees – "because they don't talk back," he said. My two younger sisters and I felt his steadiness, his support and his gruff love. For instance, he sometimes got mother and the three of us corsages on Mother's Day, even when we were little.

Meanwhile, in California, dad's brother had two sons. We saw them occasionally when we took a trip down the coast, but they never came to visit us. By the time they were in high school, my uncle was drinking heavily and then my dad got news from

another relative: both boys had run away, because my uncle went after them with a baseball bat! Their parents divorced and the two boys disappeared for years. Neither went to college. Both became long-distance truckers, working the AlCan Highway up to Alaska and later, along the oil pipeline. The older one did care for his father as he died; the other was never reconciled. Even now, they barely speak.

I'm telling you this family story because now I see it through the lens of Joseph's question: What to do about Mary's pregnancy?

My dad made a choice to shelter new life, again and again. In 45 years of medical practice, including ten on various Indian reservations, he delivered hundreds of babies. He worked hard, put his family first, kept the Sabbath, and was one of the few doctors in our county who supported Medicare. When I asked him about that, he smiled and said "Well, I won't mind being paid for work I'm already doing."

His brother made another choice, which was to let his violent temper rule his behavior. He scoffed at religion and public service. He belittled my dad, although he stayed in touch for his share of whatever might be left when his parents died. As far as I know, he made no attempt to swallow his pride or alter his behavior to reach out to his parents or his children. He never tried AA or sought recovery. He didn't even know he needed healing.

Their choices mattered, and so do ours. And the structures we choose to help us sustain our choices matter as well. Joseph found himself standing by the manger in a stable far from home because he assumed responsibility for Mary as a pregnant teenager. And we find ourselves here, in this room at Seekers Church, because we have made a choice to be here, rather than somewhere else on a Sunday morning.

Like Joseph, our choices make a difference, for ourselves and for others even if we do not have children of our own. Every day, we can choose to let our actions be guided by temper – or truth. We can develop the spiritual discipline to stand quietly by the manger scene, however it shows up for us, or we can pout and criticize others for not being who we want them to be. We can choose to offer shelter to the more vulnerable, or turn away and protect whatever we imagine in ours alone.

I'm particularly aware that Jesus entered the lineage of David through Joseph's choice because Peter and I do not have biological children. We didn't have to practice being a good father or mother, steady and clear, when our teenagers acted

out. But we have been tested by other experiences – the violence and separation of his two years in Vietnam, each followed by hospital stays – and the family dynamics of being part of this community for forty years. That hasn't always been easy or comfortable. The older I get, the more I see that those questions of character and choices really matter.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, **I want to close** with a new poem by Wendell Berry. It has been a beacon for me this year:

Remembering that it happened once,
We cannot turn away the thought,
As we go out, cold, to our barns
Toward the long night's end, that we
Ourselves are living in the world
It happened in when it first happened,
That we ourselves, opening a stall
(A latch thrown open countless times
Before), might find them breathing there,
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,
The mother kneeling over Him,
The husband standing in belief
He scarcely can believe, in light
That lights them from no source we see,
An April morning's light, the air
Around them joyful as a choir.
We stand with one hand on the door,

Looking into another world
That is this world, the pale daylight
Coming just as before, our chores
To do, the cattle all awake,
Our own white frozen breath hanging
In front of us; and we are here
As we have never been before,
Sighted as not before, our place
Holy, although we knew it not.¹

Joseph's question, "What to do about Mary's pregnancy," opens a door on Christmas for me. And it helps me give thanks for all the brave, decent, quiet men who have sheltered more vulnerable people in time of trouble. Many of you are sitting here today.

Next month, while I am away leading a retreat in Pennsylvania, Peter will be hosting four women who will be staying at our house for the "Million Women March." He will drop them off at the march, and have warm soup for them at the end of the day. That's Joseph work.

It makes me thankful for this church as a stable where we can gather in the morning light, hear the ancient stories once again, and be amazed at the wonder of new life being born into our world through the choices that we make every day.

May it be so,

Amen.