

A Surprise Adoption

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for December 19, 2021
based upon Matthew 1:18-25*

Years ago, in the first church I pastored in NE I was talking to a little boy during a rehearsal of our Christmas pageant. I asked this little guy what part he was playing that morning. He said it was only a small part. He had no lines. It was a kind of a “dud,” he said.

He had hoped to be a king, or a least a shepherd holding a shepherd’s crook. But, he was very small so they gave him the part of Joseph.

"I just stand here," he said with a child’s brand of resignation. And, I think this sermon began right then.

Joseph’s part seems small, next to Mary’s – Mary is visited by an angel in person, up close, so close that she can hear the angel’s breathing.

In major contrast, Joseph receives what amounts to a one sentence tweet from God.

That contrast is captured perfectly in a fabulous piece of late medieval art known today as the “Merode Altarpiece,” now located in *The Cloisters* in New York. It was painted about 1425. The oil painting is made up of three panels.

The main panel is the angel's annunciation to Mary. It’s the largest scene, and the central focus of the triptych. It’s quite lovely in its striking, bright color, in the rich drapery that Mary wears, in the architecturally beautiful room that surrounds her. To the right, in a much smaller panel, is a man at work in a rather common workshop. Note that he is much older than Mary. He sits alone at his workbench.

The open window behind him shows a typical scene in a small city. There is nothing “religious” in the scene. No angel, no candle, no holy book; just an old man at work in his shop.

That man’s world is about to be rocked. The news that the angel is giving to his fiancé, Mary, will soon be given to him. The angel will visit Joseph, not on a bright day, but rather when he jumps up in bed, in a cold sweat, to be told that Mary is pregnant, and not by him, and that he is supposed to accept Mary's child as his own, and raise the child, calling him Jesus.

In the painting, Joseph knows nothing about that. He is doing what he did on any other day. He is hard at work at an ordinary job, in an ordinary town. Yet without him, there would be no Christmas.

Mary's story is so clean -- an immaculate angel, carrying a lily in many paintings. Nobody I know in the Renaissance painted Joseph bolt upright in bed after having a bad dream. Joseph's story is down and dirty. Probably because most of life is --

Joseph's story is the story of a man who finds he is in over his head. And, you have to admit, life is like that -- for everyone sometimes. That's the design. That's the default position of the human universe. We're supposed to get in over our heads. That's where real growth becomes possible.

Let me ask, then -- when did it last happen for you?

Thomas Moore, in his book, *THE SOUL'S RELIGION* includes a chapter entitled, *The Way Of Disintegration*. It's about the growth available to us when things fall apart -- our dreams evaporate -- our choices become insipid to us and we find ourselves boxed in by them.

Thomas Moore has always been amazing in this regard. Other spiritual authors write about the transcendent experiences of spirit -- like Mary's *Magnificat*.

"My soul magnifies the Lord."

Moore likes to talk about the more earthy, overgrown experiences of the holy. Think of Joseph the craftsman, covered with shavings and called to marry this girl who's carrying a baby that isn't his.

Moore talks about the power available to us when our world falls apart as Joseph's has -- how it has the power to turn us inside-out and show us our real potential.

Moore says, "We become most who we are when we allow the spirit to dismember us, unsettling our plans and understandings, remaking us from the very foundations of our existence. Nothing is more challenging, nothing less sentimental, than the invitation of spirit **to become who we are and not who we think we ought to be.**"

Joseph had to come to terms with the fact that he was up to the challenge he faced just as he was.

Pema Chodrin, in her book, *When Things Fall Apart*, adds another element to the facing of such a moment. She says, "When things are shaky and nothing is working, we might realize that we are on the verge of something. We might realize that this is a very vulnerable and tender place, and that tenderness can go either way. We can shut down and feel resentful or we can touch in on that throbbing quality."

I think that's the kind of thing that happened to Joseph. He was engaged to a woman who he knew, kind of outclassed him and, at the same time, brought little into the

marriage besides her youth.

It's a tricky thing, these May / September bonds, right? And just when he realizes for certain that this isn't the marriage he bargained for (Mary being pregnant) he doesn't just bail on her.

One reason is he is a caring man. The other is that something is telling him that this thing is bigger than he is, and in a good way. It has, as Chodrin says, a throbbing quality.

They are together in this tender and vulnerable place, and while something in him is saying, "Run, buddy, run," something else is saying, maybe you were born for this.

When did that happen to you. What did it feel like?

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Joseph did not simply disappear after the angels and the shepherds went away, but that he carried out his responsibilities until he died. He had to put up with public humiliation and embarrassment in going through with the marriage.

That's not a part of the nativity we celebrate at Christmas, is it? The kings have their gold, frankincense. Joseph has his shame to carry, and he carries it very well. He got Mary safely to Bethlehem. He secured a room for them somewhere nearby. He took his place at her side and he took whatever came his way.

We see him at his most heroic when, in another angelic dream, he learns of the dangers threatening his new family. Herod is about to carry out something tradition calls, *the slaughter of the innocents*. Think of Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad and the bombing of Aleppo.

Like his Biblical namesake, the Joseph of the book of Genesis, Jesus' dad leads his family on a flight into Egypt, because out of Egypt come all of those in the Bible who save God's people: think of Moses, and that other Joseph I just mentioned, and Jeremiah, and Jesus, too.

And we discover old Joseph having yet another glorious dream where he learns that all is well; that Herod is dead, and that they can finally go back home.

Not bad for a common carpenter. What a crucible he went through, and isn't it amazing that it came in his old age? He was the right man for such a time as that, and his greatest moment came so late – everything in his life before it was merely preparation.

Has that happened to you – when you realized that all you went through when you were younger wasn't meaningless, after all – no, it was the most important education you ever had?

And then Joseph disappears. No word of his demise is mentioned. He's just . . . gone.

Finding yourself in over your head is possible at any age and to most any person. Jack Nicholson played such a character, Melvin Udall, in the movie, *As God As It Gets*. Melvin is a writer of Romance novels that Oprah might even love.

But he's an impossible personality; self obsessed, bi-polar, rude to all he meets -- throwing a small dog down a laundry chute in his apartment complex; he's a genuine piece of work.

Somehow in the course of the movie he "gets to" a lovely younger woman, a waitress named, Carol, played by Helen Hunt. It's a stretch even by Hollywood standards, but Jack Nicholson pulls it off. His Melvin's utters a line that has become a staple of contemporary culture – he says to Helen Hunt, "You make me want to be a better man."

Something in Mary probably made old Joseph want to be, "a better man."

Friday is Christmas eve. That evening worship experience represents a wonderful moment. The baby Jesus has arrived. He will have to grow up before he is the real thing. But that can wait. His eventual wrestling-matches with the scribes and Pharisees can wait. His struggles with his own disciples – his disagreement with his own mother over whether it's time to turn water into wine – that's in the future, too. The cross? We don't have to think about it.

Right now we just bask in the holy moment as all new parents should.

On this Sunday before Christmas eve, let me invite you to think of life this way – that we are meant to live between our parents sacrifices on our behalf (think of Joseph and Mary), and a future full of mystery and strange turnings; between our own expectations about tomorrow, and what will inevitably come.

Between what we have invested in life and God's idea of our purpose for living.

One of my favorite poets is named, Li-Young Lee. He has written a poem about this whole subject called, *The Hammock* -- He begins by imagining himself as a child of five again:

*When I lay my head in my mother's lap
I think how day hides the stars,
The way I lay hidden once, waiting
Inside my mother's singing to herself.
And I remember
How she carried me on her back*

*Between home and the kindergarten,
Once each morning and afternoon. . .*

*When my son lays his head in my lap, I wonder:
Do his father's kisses keep his father's worries
From becoming his? I think, Dear God, and remember
There are stars we haven't heard from yet:
They have so far to arrive.*

Amen, I think, and I feel almost comforted. . .

*Between two unknowns, I live my life.
Between my mother's hopes, older than I am
By coming before me, and my child's wishes, older than I am
By outliving me. And what's it like?
Is it a door, and goodbye on either side?
A window, and eternity on either side?
Yes, and a little singing between two great rests.*

-- a little singing between two great rests.

Poor old Joseph. He didn't live to see Jesus grow to honorable manhood. He didn't live to see his peasant son turn the world upside down. He passed on without learning that his son would have a greater effect on the world than anyone who ever walked this God's earth.

Yes, but what Joseph did, in his ordinary and faithful way, made everything that followed possible. He wasn't a Jesus. He wasn't even a Mary, but he was all he was called to be, and maybe more.

My father was a member of what Tom Brokaw has called, the greatest generation. By being ordinary, hard working and faithful to me, his son, he was something of a Joseph. Maybe your father was too. Or maybe it was your mother who was the every day kind of hero who made you who you are today.

Either way, let me close with this: It's a single line from one of the best novels ever written: *Middlemarch*. It's author, George Eliot, praises her heroine to the sky on the last page of her novel with the following epitaph. It could stand for Joseph's epitaph as well.

"That things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to [those persons] who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Amen.