

Joseph Did Not Wait

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O God, through the example and prayers of Mary, the God-Bearer, and Joseph, her beloved spouse, make us eager with expectation that we may joyfully embrace your coming.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In popular devotional literature before the 16th century, Joseph was almost always portrayed as a comical old man, befuddled by God and befuddled by the Virgin Mary. But a careful hearing of today's gospel reveals Joseph as sensitive and sensible.

Learning that Mary is pregnant and knowing that the child is not his, Joseph, being a just and good and righteous man, decides to put off his intended marriage and set aside his hope and dream of a life with Mary, his future in the community, a promise of happiness, and a family truly his own.

What was Joseph feeling, I wonder: betrayed, heart broken, ashamed, rejected, hurt, deceived, angry, Whatever, he resolves to break the engagement, or, as the text says, "He planned to dismiss her quietly." Joseph is prepared to do what many of us do all the time when confronted with things that are troubling or embarrassing. He is ready to hide Mary, to sweep the situation under the rug (or the straw, as it may be), to cover up the facts.

But let us not be quick to judge. The alternative for Joseph was to publicly accuse Mary of adultery, which could have subjected her to a trial. So unwilling to make a fuss that would embarrass him and dishonor Mary, Joseph decides to do what is honorable, correct, and merciful. Send her away quietly and with discretion, hoping that sending Mary away before things grew obvious would spare everyone needless hurt.

But then Joseph had a dream. In the dream, an angel of the Lord appears and, in the presence of God, speaks to Joseph, unmasking his fear, his cowardice, and misgivings. But what, I wonder, really is the fear lying beneath his seemingly thoughtful, sensitive, and merciful solution?

How many of our own polite, reasonable responses are motivated by a fear similar to Joseph's? How often do we beg off justice, give up mercy, or renege on charity with the excuse that the time isn't right, that folks are just not ready, are not prepared?

So we hesitate. We wait for an end to racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, discrimination, equality for all, . . . It's a dilemma. Do we wait until people are comfortable with change? Or do people become more comfortable in the wake of change?

If we waited until folks were ready, would we still be waiting for parts of the country to be comfortable with integration? If the General Convention of the Episcopal Church had waited until everyone was ready for gays to be ordained, would Gene Robinson now be the Bishop of New Hampshire? And when someone steps up and attempts to push things along and offers assurance that God is present and active in our midst and in our lives, we protest that we aren't ready, that we need more time to prepare.

But for what, I wonder? For a second coming of the Christ, now delayed 2000 years, still waiting and holding? Frankly we are cowards, most of us, most of the time, hiding behind the same fear and excuse put forward by Joseph.

Outside the Gospel there are other stories that we treasure this time of year, which suggest the same thing.

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the intrusive spirits of Jacob Marley — and of Christmas past, present, and future — replay before Ebenezer Scrooge's tired old eyes the long running tragedy of his life keeping humanity at a distance — a life lacking in joy and decency and charity and kindness. Until he encounters his final and most awful visitor, a "solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, towards him . . . shrouded in a deep black garment . . ."

And Scrooge is forced to watch as his worldly goods, the mainstays of his identity, are plundered down to a pair of sleeve buttons and a pair of sugar tongs — tokens of success Scrooge had clung to so tightly now revealed as mere scraps for the scavengers shop, tossed away atop a pile of "old rags, bottles, and bones".

Finally Scrooge is reduced to a trembling supplicant before his own freshly chiseled tombstone. And the question is: Was old Scrooge ready or prepared for this? It hardly seems so. Yet when he returns to the real world, he is changed. It is an almost literal second birth. He has repented — truly, literally turned around and reclaimed his wholeness, his humanity.

Of course, that's fiction. But it is fiction hiding real truth. Consider another story, a real story in a real place at a real time, France, Christmas Eve, 1914.

World War I was only months old, and the casualties were increasing daily. All along the western front across France and into Belgium, with the Germans on one side, and the French and English on the other hunkered down in trenches, knee deep in freezing water, were the soldiers.

And on that Christmas Eve, that first Christmas since the war began, in the penetrating dampness as it grew dark, the British were puzzled to see lanterns rising above the German lines and the Germans calling for them to leave their trenches and join them in no-man's land. The French and British were naturally wary. What if it was a trap? But slowly, one by one, the British and the French laid down their arms and began leaving their trenches and ventured into no-man's land to join the Germans. The Germans produced small fir trees glowing with candles, hung with cookies and cotton taken from medical dressings.

They shook hands, swapped cigarettes, sausage, candy, wine, Christmas cakes, and even their caps. They exchanged addresses and expressed deep admiration for each other. And they sang carols, including a lovely old German carol which begins, appropriately: "O thou blissful, O thou joyous mercy bringing Christmas time . . .". It's

all documented, even with a few old grainy photographs, how they continued like this throughout the night and through Christmas Day, playing games of football (or soccer), and then, as Christmas Day drew to a close, together, these sworn enemies assisted each other in burying their dead, which were lying all around them from the previous days fighting.

Weeks earlier the Pope, Benedict 15th, had urged a a Christmas truce, a temporary cessation of the fighting. His request was blatantly dismissed by the generals on both sides as unrealistic and impossible. But now it was happening, and the big brass were furious. Or, as one British soldier put it, this so-called Christmas truce was driving them wild! And they sent orders that it should never ever happen again. And perhaps they were right. How can you successfully fight a war when the enemy has a human face, a name, and a photo of their children tucked into their breast pocket?

The fighting resumed on December 26, and continued without interruption for another 47 months. The so-called Christmas truce of 1914 was never repeated. And the point? The point is that no one was prepared for this, no one was ready. But it happened, and it was embraced by those in the trenches who not only embraced it but who willed it so for at least a day and a half.

For one German soldier, Rudolf Binding, faithful subject of the Kaiser, captain in the German army, a patriot committed to the war, his participation in the Christmas truce had planted doubts. Later he would observe: “The fraternization that has been going on between our trenches and those of the enemy, when friend and foe go to fetch straw from the same rack to protect themselves from cold and rain, and never a shot is fired: this is a symptom that there is no longer any sense in this business.”

So what does it mean to be prepared, to be ready?

I’m not sure anymore that I know what it means. Really, how do we prepare ourselves, how do we make ourselves ready, to lose a spouse, a loved one, a friend, . . .? How prepared can we be when a valuable cherished possession is broken or stolen. Or our comfortable financial plan for the future dissolves, or a job is terminated, or a belief irrevocably shattered, or our rigid sense of identity is carried off like ice in a swollen spring stream. The best, the most we should expect of ourselves, is simply to embrace it, acknowledge it, and maybe even will it to be.

Joseph had a plan. He was ready to do what he thought needed to be done. He was prepared to deal with what was happening to his life, but then came the dream and the angel, who, in God’s very presence, dismissed Joseph’s good intentions and careful preparation: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid, that is, do not hesitate, to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” There it was, plainly laid out before him: take Mary as your wife, or literally, Mary is your wife — don’t be afraid to take her home and live with her openly and publicly. It was something Joseph hadn’t considered, and Joseph embraced it, and willed it so.

The message of this last Sunday of Advent is not that God is coming, but that God is here, that we are never and can never be prepared for the coming of God, for God is constantly with us, has never left us, never for one moment been absent from us. Emanuel is what we call him: God with us. The baby would not wait to be born. His birth would be neither slowed nor stopped, nor his life obscured by our hesitation. Jesus is the tenacity of God and the everlasting challenge to our procrastination. He is

the mockery of our excuses.

Joseph, silent Joseph, as the gospels portray him, never once opening his mouth or saying a word. Joseph, always off to the side, always in the shadows. He is our teacher on this last Sunday before the Christmas feast. Between now and December 25 no one else is going to come along to point out the way for us. Joseph is our last chance and our best hope to get it right.

You and I, we live in a world that in some ways isn't much different from the one into which Jesus first came — a world that in spite of the prophets' warnings and the baptist hell-fire preaching to prepare and get ready was no more ready or prepared or unanimous in welcoming him than is ours, a world that was decidedly not united in worshiping him, so like our own, an indifferent world. But he came anyway. Ready or not, he came, and some embraced his coming and grew in his love and grace and shared it around.

And when Joseph awoke, he took Mary as his wife, brought her to his home, and when she gave birth to a son, Joseph, not Mary but Joseph, named him Jesus. With that God breaks through all the cracks and the frail veneer covering our fear and destroys the certainty of our preparation.

And that is where others were to find him, this Jesus, our Emmanuel, wedged like a thorn in Joseph's side, tucked in a stall behind an inn on a backwater street in a backwater part of the empire. Those who sought him and celebrated his coming were never prepared; they lived daily with the immediate realities of life, without the luxury of procrastination or excuses, and never could have been ready even with all the time in the world.

For us to be prepared for this Jesus, this Emmanuel, is an illusion, a fiction. God asks only that we be present. For us to be ready is unrealistic. God asks only that we be willing for it to be and embrace him as he comes among us.