



Accepting the Christmas Burden

**A reflection on
the annunciation
of Joseph**

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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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

I suppose if we were to take a vote on which of the two stories of the birth of Jesus we like best—Luke's story or Matthew's—Luke's story would win hands down, and for good reason. His story is full of poetry—it speaks of the heavens split open, of brightness flooding the plains of Bethlehem. It makes you feel the beating of a thousand angels' wings, voices high and wild like trumpets. It evokes a sense of awe in shepherds bending low at the manger. It would hardly be Christmas without hearing Luke's story

Matthew's story is quite different. If we begin reading the opening verses of chapter one, it sounds more like a page from the telephone directory than the Bible. The writer was interested in tracing the genealogy of the Holy Child, beginning with Abraham and including some unsavory characters we would prefer leaving out, and then concluding with Joseph—not as the father of Jesus, but Joseph as the husband of Mary. Then comes the story of the birth—not at all like a Hallmark Christmas card but more in terms of the offense attached to it.

The engagement of Mary to Joseph is followed by the discovery of her pregnancy and the offense and embarrassment to Joseph, who is described as a man who always did what was right, which means he went by the Book. And because of it, he tries to figure out how to do the right thing in breaking the engagement with the least amount of hurt and public disgrace to Mary.

Finally, through an angel in a dream (we call it the annunciation or the announcement to Joseph) God gives him the greatest Christmas gift imagin-

able, a special kind of spectacles by which he can now read the Book rightly and see through the lens of grace the goodness and love of God. "I want you to go ahead and take Mary as your wife, and take care of her. I have chosen you to be father to the boy, to care for him and be his protector."

I have a hunch that for all the lack of poetry, Matthew's story may be closer to where most of us live, closer to what God's coming into human life—yours and mine—always involves, namely, offense, danger, risk, fear of the unknown, trying to figure out what is the right thing to do.

To be more specific: What is the offense? The stumbling block?

Trying to put myself in Joseph's place, there is the burden of being handed something you had nothing to do with, the burden of something you try to manage and do the right thing, yet knowing you can't; the burden of something you must nevertheless accept. The angel reminds Joseph it is not principally about Mary's virginity. It is about the mystery of God becoming flesh in Mary's womb without the will of man but by the Holy Spirit.

The late Olav Hartman from the Church of Sweden enters into Joseph's fears in a touching way: "God lit the stars over Joseph's house but Joseph had to provide him a refuge in that house. But what does Joseph say? 'Do not fear to take Mary your wife.'...How can a man have God in the house without being afraid? Just think of lying awake at night, hearing your wife breathe, and knowing that the world's heart is beating in her womb! The angel was fearsome, but in the presence of him who lay under Mary's heart the angels



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covered their eyes. 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear.'"

What if Joseph's annunciation is not simply a beautiful legend or a sentimental Christmas condiment but the story

of God's coming under your roof and into your house and mine? That's what Matthew's story is saying—or better yet what Almighty God is saying as he comes to you this Christmas, tapping ever so lightly at your door and thrusting a child into your arms and saying, "He is yours. Unto you a child is born. Unto you a son is given." This might send us and the church into postpartum shock—wanting to evade this "unto-us-ness," wanting to protect ourselves from this Holy Child and some of the changes and tasks he might ask.

A few Advents ago in a church in Rättvik on the shores of Lake Siljan in Dalarna, Sweden, I witnessed postpartum shock in a Swedish father sitting on the sidelines of the annual Christmas pageant. At first I wondered why he was there. He seemed so out of place among the throngs of little silver-winged angels and a handful of shepherds with gray woolen sheep. But then in the midst of children singing we heard a baby's cry from the manger. The postpartum shock was that there was no Jesus doll in the crib but a real, live baby.

Mary, a child herself, tried comforting the baby by pushing a pacifier into his mouth with Joseph in his bathrobe standing by helplessly. In the wings was the father of the baby (let's call him Joseph too), plainly in postpartum shock, his sweaty face showing anxiety and pain, with his arms reaching out to his child for fear the frightened Mary who picked up the crying infant might drop him. Yet like the Swedish father, it must have been touching to every parent and grandparent living into the drama being played out, realizing that each of us has a responsibility for which we have been chosen, and knowing the gift we have been given is far greater than we ever know. This child is yours to love and to care for and to nurture in the faith.

If today you feel you are being handed something you haven't bargained for, I proclaim to you the angel's word to Joseph: do not be afraid. Joseph's offense is a happy offense.

For one thing, owning this Holy Child as your own summons the best in you. It lays claim to your life in such a way that the only fitting name we can give to it is

"a rebirth," that the Child who was born in Bethlehem may be born again even in us today. But let me remind you, before the mystery of God's coming to you in the Child, you won't ever be

the same. For the Child invites, evokes the best in you, and by grace cancels out the worst. It will mean not simply living as a follower of Jesus but becoming bearer of his life to your children, grandchildren, friends, and neighbors.

When Joseph woke from sleep he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do. This man who always did what was right becomes responsible—but in a new way, beyond what the law says. Now he reads the Book through the lens of grace, the kindness and love of God. And upon the birth of the child, Joseph does as the angel said and names him Jesus, God saves, for he shall save his people from their sins.

Joseph's offense is also happy because the pain of it is shared. Joseph bore a heavy burden as protector of the Holy Family, not only in Bethlehem but in the flight to Egypt to save the Child's life, and when the time was right he led them back to their home in Nazareth.

His name is Emmanuel, God with us—whatever the burdens of responsibility we bear in his name, whatever the pain of failure in not always being up to it, whatever the bumps and hard knocks, the doubts and confusion, whatever the questions that keep our minds or stomachs tied up in knots wondering what and where the answers are.

His name is Emmanuel, God with us. As the old hymn "Moment by Moment" says, "Never a trial that he is not there, never a burden that he doth not bear." He knows what it's like to be Joseph, to be you, to be me.

Dear friends, please do not forget Joseph. Without Joseph there might have been no Christmas, either then or now. The good news is that Christmas will last as long as God can find in every community one person who says as Joseph said, "I will do what is the right thing to do," which is to read the Good Book and to see the human condition through the spectacles of the love and grace and kindness of God, then to pursue justice for the weak and oppressed. As long as there is one in every community, it will always be Christmas. The question is, of course, whether or not you will be that person. ■