

The Annunciations to Joseph

The Second Sunday after Christmas, January 3, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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After the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, 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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean." *Matt. 2:13-15,19-23*

When we hear the word Annunciation, most of us first think of the Annunciation to Mary, as told in the Gospel of Luke. '*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.*' (1:28) From that moment on, Mary remains prominent in Luke's telling of the origins and birth of Jesus the Messiah.

Not so with the Gospel of Matthew. Here, Joseph comes to the fore. And here, Joseph is the one to receive the Annunciations. Yes, I said Annunciations — plural. In Matthew's account of the origins and birth of Jesus the Messiah, Joseph receives *three* Annunciations.

Matthew's gospel opens with an earthly genealogy of Jesus — notably through the bloodline of Joseph — 42 generations worth, beginning with Israel's patriarch, Abraham. As the story unfolds, Mary remains obscure. Matthew presents her pregnancy before marriage as a moral dilemma, for Joseph: "... *being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, [he] planned to dismiss her quietly.*" (1:19) But then, the first of the his three Annunciations: "... *just when he had resolved to [put her away], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, '... do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'*" (1:20)

Matthew describes the actual birth of Jesus only fleetingly and after the fact: "... *after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea ...*" (2:1) What happened '*after*' is that wise men came from the East, in search of a newborn king. They of course went first to Herod, the regional earthly ruler. Their inquiry did lead them to the child but also put the Holy Family at grave risk due to Herod's suspicion, fear and violence.

And here, the second Annunciation to Joseph: "... *an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt ..."* By tradition, the Holy Family was in Egypt two to three years or more, after which, Joseph's third Annunciation: "*When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.'*"

We're told that all this took place "... *to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'*" Here and throughout his telling, Matthew frames the story to show us God's plan of salvation, generations in the making, foretold by the prophets, and now being fulfilled.

This fulfilment, as Matthew sees it, significantly relies on Joseph, on Joseph's favor, and on Joseph's faithfulness. To that we may say '*Yes!*' and '*Thanks be to God!*' But Joseph's own ground-level experience in this story may have felt less like following a grand, clear blueprint and more like

a series of challenges that were unsought, out-of-the-box and disruptive. The most valuable take-home lessons that Joseph may offer us may be found at his ground level.

Here let's remember that Joseph did not see himself as the gospel writer later saw him. Joseph was a carpenter from Galilee. Nothing we know about him suggests that he had any personal ambitions for anything other or more. Furthermore, to compare: in response to her Annunciation Mary was both talkative and inquisitive. By contrast, in Matthew's three Annunciations to Joseph, he never speaks a word. In fact, Joseph never speaks a word in any of the four Gospels and is not even mentioned in Mark.

We may surmise that Joseph was what we now call the strong quiet type. Arguably, a strong quiet type was needed for this particular calling, and, arguably, the world continues to need strong quiet types. I was reminded of this by a line from a movie I saw this past week.¹ It featured two siblings who, from their earliest memories, have aspired to greatness and fame in a particular sport. The sister advances while the brother remains obscure, even though it's not for lack of talent. He is also a gifted teacher and has a devoted local following. Animosity between siblings escalates in tandem with the sister's growing fame until a confrontation erupts. Wanting him to see his value, even if fame has eluded him, the sister says: "*Just because millions of people aren't cheering when you do [what you're doing] doesn't mean it's not important.*" That may be a take-home lesson for some of us as we contemplate the ground-level experiences of Joseph – or our own. How can we carry on with what we believe are our God-given commitments without others cheering us on? "*Just because millions of people aren't cheering when you do [what you're doing] doesn't mean it's not important.*"

But what is important? How do we know? One answer came to me years ago from a gifted and faithful priest I knew, Dan Caballero. He said, "*What's important is algo que vale la pena.*" It was a colloquialism from his Mexican-American heritage, and it means *the thing that's worth doing*.

With regard to Joseph, imagine the guffaws and speculation he endured when he said yes to marrying the girl pregnant with a child not his own. Imagine learning that the government is upon his shoulder – that Herod has placed a bounty on the life of his newborn son and no doubt on him as well. Imagine Joseph's idle carpenter's shop back in Galilee as he takes his family to Egypt, on far side of the wilderness, where he'd never aspired to go.

Three Annunciations come to Joseph. In each case the angel gives direction from God that will result in spectacular upheaval. Even so, three times Joseph follows the angels' guidance. No questions asked. We can only surmise that Joseph knew *algo que vale la pena* and recognized it when it came his way. What about you and me? What is your *algo que vale la pena*?

We could argue that it was easier for Joseph. "*He got three annunciations!*" True, and let's also observe that in each case they came to Joseph in his dreams. You or I may have never had a *Capital A* Annunciation, but we do dream, and looking for God in our dreams is a particular spiritual gift and art. I sadly must leave questions of dreaming and God for another time, but given the prominence of this feature in Matthew's account of Joseph and his faith, I would be remiss not to at least briefly draw attention to dreams. Maybe Joseph will nudge some of us to renew our curiosity about our dreams and how, through them, God may be calling us or may be otherwise present to us there.

In my ministry I have sometimes suggested the value of periodically revisiting our understanding of the blessed virgin Mary, mother of Jesus – not mainly to fortify and defend our dogmas but to ponder what we can learn from her example. Now I wonder if we may also be well served by re-examining Joseph. Looking at his life and faith, his dreams and his responses may deepen our own lives and faith, our own dreams and responses to God. And who knows? Maybe his example will prepare us, when the time comes, for our own Annunciations. Amen.

¹ *Fighting with My Family*, 2019