

Joseph, A Wrinkled Man

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 2019
by Christopher Poore

Readings

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise. Amen.

A little later today, we'll be "greening" the church, and the beautiful figures of our Nativity set will come out from their year-long hiding. Today's Gospel introduces us to a few of those figures—Mary and, especially, we might say, to Joseph.

Joseph is a strange person to begin your Gospel with, as Matthew does. The other Gospel writers start with louder human figures. Think about who gets to speak first in the other Gospels. John's Gospel introduces us to the confrontational proclamations of John the Baptist, as does Mark—"Repent!" "Prepare the way!" And Luke starts with Zechariah, who is so doubtful of certain miracles that it is only by divine miracle that he can be shut up. In those Gospels, there is always a man letting everyone know what he thinks.

The case is rather different in Matthew. Because here is Joseph, Joseph betrothed to Mary, Joseph newly aware that she is pregnant, Joseph addressed by an angel and reminded of prophecy—and throughout all of this, Joseph says nothing. Not a word. Not once does the Gospel quote him directly. He does not speak.

That silence is dangerous. We may be tempted to project our own assumptions and fantasies onto him—we want to put our own words into his mouth. And that is what our Christian imagination has been doing for several centuries now.

Look, for instance, at how much the figure of Joseph has changed over time in the world of sacred art. Early on, he almost always has white, thinning hair, a big white beard: he's old, confronted not just with the birth of Jesus, but with the uncomfortable fact of his mortality, which means that he might not always be there to protect this vulnerable child he has decided to shepherd into life.

But then, following the Reformation, Joseph is transformed in Roman Catholic art: he suddenly becomes younger. Some have argued that this is Rome's way of putting a younger, braver face on the authority of the Church. The Church gives Joseph some Rogaine, he gets some hair color for his graying beard, the wrinkles smooth out. And soon, filtered through our ideals about the home, he's kneeling here before us, a member of the "Holy Family," the nuclear family from the Jerusalem suburbs. And I have to admit that I have mixed feelings about this Holy Family: on the one hand, I like to think of the security of this 'perfect' family, this family without wrinkles. On the other hand: I know that at least my family doesn't look like that. Since my childhood, I've seen my family struggle through divorces and custody battles, estrangements and misunderstandings, addiction and loss. And so, images of the Holy Family can all too easily be used to bludgeon ourselves with a measuring stick against which we will always come up short. And perhaps that is why I like today's Gospel: because it leaves the wrinkles in, and it is very hard indeed to use this passage as a bludgeon. It repels our fantasies of the perfect family.

So let's trace some of those wrinkles. First, there is that line about Joseph being "a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace." If we peer into this fault-line in the text, we are faced with a very deep, very dark world of violence. Here is Joseph's dilemma, here is the only question that Joseph can conceive of asking himself: to dismiss her publicly or quietly. It is simply assumed that Mary will become a social outcast—the laws of the time, Jewish and Roman, practically demand that a woman suspected of adultery be dismissed. So that is not an open

question: the question is about how much shame Mary will suffer. When Matthew mentions “public disgrace,” he is probably thinking of the public tests which a woman could be subjected to in order to find out if she was an adulteress. It is hard to know exactly how Old Testament laws would have meshed with Roman rule, but at least according to Deuteronomy, if a woman lives in a city, she is presumed guilty—she must have been a willing participant, otherwise she would have screamed out and someone would have heard her (Deut. 22:23-27). And then there is the test described in Numbers. A man brings his betrothed to the temple, the priests give her bitter water to drink, water that will make her stomach burn—and then the priests pray for her womb to drop from her body. If she remains intact, she is innocent (Numbers 5:11-31). But if she is proven guilty, Deuteronomy says, she may be “purged from your midst” (22:24), indeed: put to death. This is the punitive world opened by that little phrase in the Gospel: unwilling to expose her to “public disgrace.”

This is an image of Joseph and Mary that isn’t about them peacefully cooing over a creche, with nearly identical expressions. This is an image where the two of them are confronted by the possibility of violence: Mary’s life is literally in Joseph’s hands. From this moment on, their relationship is implanted in a world in which the taking of life is possible—murder is possible. And the only thing that forestalls this possibility is Joseph’s “righteousness,” a word that opens up an entirely different form of existence, an existence allied against murder. His righteousness consists not in abandoning the law but in attempting to interpret the law as mercifully as possible. As the legal scholars of his day would have told him, all this public disgrace can be avoided if he chooses to renounce any claim to his own restitution—if he decides that he doesn’t need to be “paid back” for what has happened to him. And having chosen mercy, Joseph sleeps.

And this is, of course, another wrinkle in the text. Not just that Joseph is silent, not just that Joseph has the potential to reduce another human being to nothing—but that he sleeps. Remember back to that First Sunday of Advent, when we heard these words from the Sunday readings: “Keep

awake!” Jesus said (Matt. 24:22), and St. Paul too: “it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep” (Rom. 13:11). And here, near the end of Advent, there is a man able to sleep, at peace with his decision. Sleep, then, becomes a symbol of insufficiency—it is not enough to be righteous, it is not enough to be merciful—these will not get us far enough. Trusting in mercy and righteousness alone, we will sleep in the world—unaware, dead to the possibility that there is more to know, to see, to touch.

And that is because there is something higher than mercy, and that is love. I mean, let’s be very clear about what the angel is asking of Joseph. The angel asks him to take Mary as his wife. You can imagine the rumors this would cause. Joseph would go from being the injured party, the victim of adultery—to appearing as one who offended against the law. He and Mary will both be accused of not following the law: he will no longer appear “righteous.” So the angel is asking Joseph, in essence, to give up even the little privilege that comes from being a defendant—he is to stand accused, just as accused as Mary and just as innocent.

The angel is asking Joseph to take on Mary’s public shame as his own—not just to mercifully minimize her suffering, but to descend into the depths of her suffering. That should sound familiar to us. That should sound like Jesus—his incarnation as an immersion in our suffering and shame. In this regard, Joseph receives an annunciation not unlike the one Mary receives: he is asked to conceive of what Christ might look like in the world, and then he must bear that image into the world, enact that image, and indeed, name that image: Jesus, the one who saves, Emmanuel, God with us. Here is the question of the Incarnation for all of us: am I willing not just to alleviate another’s suffering through mercy, but to take it on as my own in love?

There’s one last wrinkle in the text that I should mention—that line about Joseph and Mary having no marital relations “until” she bears a son. “Until” is only a rough translation of the Greek or the Latin—and for reasons you might not find interesting or convincing, theologians working in

those ancient languages took it to mean that Mary remained a virgin even after marriage. In fact, it would be hard to find a pre-modern theologian who didn't hold this view. Church Fathers like Augustine, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom; medieval female mystics like Gertrude the Great; Reformers like Martin Luther, even our own Anglicans Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer, and John Wesley (if I can count him for the team)—all of them preached the perpetual virginity. No doubt, many of you are Calvinists in this sense: John Calvin thought it smacked of indecency to speculate about Joseph and Mary's relationship. That still leaves us with the problem of how we will talk about what the church has said—what will we say when we are asked how Augustine's thoughts are in any way useful? And, in our terms here, I'd like to suggest that we fundamentally misunderstand the value of that tradition if we use it to denigrate the body and sexuality: if it is a way of lifting up the holy virgins over, well, let's admit, the rest of us. No doubt, the tradition has been used in exactly this harmful, destructive way. But what if it was a way of adding another wrinkle into this story. It might expand what we mean when we use the word "marriage." Even Augustine, writing of Joseph and Mary, finally admits that marriage is not defined by procreation—but by affection—something to remember as our Church attempts to faithfully administer that sacrament.¹

And here's something else: to say that Mary is perpetually a virgin means that you have to come up with some other explanation for all the brothers and sisters that Jesus has running around him as he trots from place to place—and the tradition has offered another explanation: they were Joseph's children from a prior marriage. The Holy Family has suddenly gotten a lot more complicated. We might do well to add a few more children into that Nativity scene.

This would be, in the language of today, a "mixed" or "blended" household, a household with children who are wondering, "Will this new woman love me?" A mother who wonders, "How

¹ St. Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. Volume VI, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 2.1.2-3, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106/npnf106.vi.v.ii.html>.

will I earn the trust of these children? How will I heal the sorrow of them losing their mother—knowing I can never replace her?” I mean, really, what would happen if at the beginning of the Christian story, there was not some perfectly pure, tidy marriage—but a second marriage, a second chance at love and friendship and affection, a marriage based on the renunciation of violence and the commitment to taking on the other’s suffering. That would be a resurrection of human life and hope that makes way for the earth-shattering reality of Christ’s resurrection. Seen in this way, the angel in our Gospel today is already proclaiming the resurrection: Do not be afraid, the angel says: it will cost more than you have to give, almost no one will believe you, you will be homeless, you will be refugees clinging to one another, but, you will be alive, more alive than you would’ve been if you’d kept things tidy and perfect, more alive than if you’d never dreamed that there was another way to live in a world that is constantly demanding vengeance.

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