

Gospel Reading**Matthew 1:18-25**

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.

Being an Earthly Father to a Child from Heaven

Sometimes Daddies get the short end of the stick when it comes to the whole baby process and Joseph was no exception. He thought he was just getting a wife, a good girl from a good family, named Mary. He had not bargained on becoming a father before the wedding even took place. He had not expected to become a parent *because* the child was certainly not his. The whole situation surrounding Jesus' birth is a bit scandalous. However influenced we are by puritanical social norms, this situation is not uncommon in our human lives. Sometimes, brides are beginning to "show" a little as they are trying to fit into their wedding gowns. Sometimes, the infant is already born and gets to witness the marriage of his or her own parents. The groom is usually looking surprised, proud, embarrassed, and excited all at once. In every instance of birth and marriage, in whatever order they occur, God is present and working through our love for one another and the captivating love of our newborn child.

Matthew is a little hazy about the details, but somehow Mary was "found to be with child." Perhaps, she couldn't fit into that wedding gown that her mom had been sewing. However they discovered her pregnancy, I'm sure her family was not pleased. I wonder if she tried to explain how an angel visited her. I wonder if she told them that this child was from God. Even if she said all of these things, I doubt that they would have believed her. In Matthew's Gospel (which we read this morning), we hear nothing from Mary's side of the story. Matthew tells us all about Joseph's response to the unexpected child. And his initial response is the most humane option available. He is "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace and plans to dismiss her quietly." Under the law he could have her killed. He could have her shamed and then stoned to death. But, because he is a righteous man, he plans to mercifully call off the wedding and let her family handle the newborn child and their promiscuous daughter.

And then God intervenes. God sends a messenger, an angel, to Joseph in a dream. The angel explains the whole thing, "This child is from God, the Holy Spirit got Mary pregnant and this baby is going to be the savior of the world. So stick around and marry this woman. God needs you to help her raise the baby." If Joseph was worried before about being the father to a child that wasn't his, he now has the challenge of being the father of the Son of God. Talk about pressure and playing second fiddle. But Joseph is a righteous man and when he wakes up he does what the angel asks. He embraces the challenge of parenting Jesus and agrees to be part of

God's plan of salvation - even if everyone in town is talking about the unexpected baby and wondering who the real father is.

Fatherhood seems to me to be a difficult role, no matter how you managed to have kids. Whether they are genetically yours, or you adopted them, or you are the step-dad. You *aren't* the mommy who carried them in her womb, nursed them at her breast, stayed home with them for the first months or even years of their lives. You're the daddy - who loves them just as much, but has a different role to play. Some daddies need to be the financial provider and spend all their time at work. Other daddies become the disciplinarians and inspire obedience but not intimacy. Some daddies are such softies that their kids know they can get whatever they want if they give dad a pitiful face. We don't really know what kind of Dad Joseph was, except that he was a righteous man who listened to angels and Jesus seems to have come out alright.

What I find compelling about this story is that Joseph agrees to be the earthly father of a child who already has a father in heaven. My initial thought is that Joseph must have felt terribly intimidated and maybe even a little jealous of Jesus' divine connections. Sometimes, Daddies get jealous of the intimate bond between his own children and their mother. How must Joseph have felt, knowing that this child is going to be the beloved son of God who says, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." Where does Joseph fit into this picture?

As I think about my own experience of becoming a mother and watching Sean become a father, I recognize that whatever anxieties we have about filling the role of parent, we are always looking for role models. I wonder if maybe Joseph did not feel threatened, but rather felt supported by Jesus' heavenly father. Maybe Joseph was relieved to know that he didn't have to be the only father of Jesus. Perhaps, Joseph was glad to have God as the model father and know that he would never have to figure out how to be a father alone. Joseph does not have to compete with God, instead he will be taught by God how to be the best father to this rather difficult and heavenly child.

Every child that comes into our lives is a gift from God. With that gift we are invited to become new people as we learn to love and care for the child. No longer is he simply Joseph, a man from the house of David, a carpenter, engaged to Mary. He becomes - *the father of Jesus*. Every man who is given a child to nurture is no longer simply called Sean, or Bryan, or Larry, or Michael, or Patrick... all these men are now called father or more intimately, Daddy. If you know your bible stories, you know that God has called you to a new life when your name changes. When your name changes to Daddy, you have a new vocation. Joseph embraced this new calling and I imagine that he also embraced an ongoing prayer conversation with his fathering role model in heaven.

"God help me to be the father that my child needs me to be, so that my child might know that he is a beloved child of God."

Each of us has many opportunities to offer up that prayer for our own children. In our Christian faith practice, baptism is one way that we publically offer that prayer and recognize our parenting partnership with God. A colleague of mine sometimes challenges parents who ask to have their children baptized, "Why are you giving this baby back to God? Don't you want to keep it for yourself? Why do you want to have your child baptized?" At some deep level, we want to baptize our children so that we are not alone in our parenting challenge. We want to know that our father in heaven, hallowed be his name, is looking after our difficult and heavenly child. Along with Joseph, we want to know that even if we make a mess of our own fatherhood, our child might still have a father in heaven and know that he or she is a beloved child of God.

God offers us a model of fatherhood and motherhood in God's relationship with Jesus and with creation. Sometimes, our earthly parents are not the kind of parents that we hope to become. Sometimes, the parents who raised us are not models of the kind of love and nurture that we hope to offer our own children. When this happens, parents can join with Joseph and lean heavily on the parenting techniques of God. So, here are a few parenting tips from the Almighty ...

1. From Genesis: Everything that I have created is GOOD! No child is ever created bad. Tell your child that he or she is created in the image of God and is full of goodness.
2. From Deuteronomy: Give your child a sense of order and structure. From the ordering of the universe to the Ten Commandments, structure gives us a framework to feel safe and protected.
3. From the Prophets: Teach your children about your faith by allowing them to witness how you live it. Be a role model of prayer, compassion for the poor and sick, offering thanks, repenting of sins, and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.
4. From the Gospels: Know that you must one day let your child go to live a life that you cannot choose or control. When that day comes, if you have shared your love and your faith with them, they will be prepared for whatever challenges life brings them.

Joseph must have done an excellent job as the father of Jesus. We know this because Jesus was so firmly rooted in his faith and relationship with his Father in heaven. Who else could have taught Jesus that he is the beloved child of God? Who else could have taught Jesus to pray to his Father in heaven? It must have been his earthly father, Joseph. I am going to close with a modern version of the Lord's Prayer. A prayer that Joseph must have inspired in Jesus and through the Gospels, Jesus taught us to pray.

*Eternal Spirit Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all.*

Loving God, in whom is heaven. The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen.

(from the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer)