



The Way of Jesus: Dream Big
Matthew 1:18-255
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December 22, 2019

Tradition is a funny thing. On the one hand, tradition is what makes us who we are. We are here today in part because tradition tells us to be: "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." "Come into God's presence with singing."

We've been lighting Advent candles all these four weeks because tradition tells us to: The first Advent wreath appeared in Germany in 1839. A Lutheran minister working at a mission for children created a wreath out of the wheel of a cart and placed 20 small red candles and 4 large white candles inside the ring. Red candles were lit on weekdays and white candles were lit on Sundays. He adapted it from a Scandinavian practice that helped citizens remember that the long winters would come to an end, that the light would return. We use evergreens and liturgical colors now, but the purpose is still the same: to remind us that the light will return.

And on Christmas Eve, for the Family Service, the first carol we'll sing is *O Come All Ye Faithful*, and for the Candlelight Communion Service, the first carol we'll sing is *Once in Royal David's City*, and while there may be many good reasons for why that has become our

habit, the honest truth is, we keep doing it because that's just the way we've always done it here. As Beverly said to me the other day, "It wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't sing *Once in Royal David's City* first!"

I wonder what traditions you and your families have. I wonder which traditions you love, and which ones you endure. You're thinking about that right now, aren't you — the things you love and the things you endure for the sake of love. That's the thing about tradition — the healthiest and holiest traditions are always rooted in a sense of deep and abiding love. Sometimes we forget that. Or at least, sometimes I forget that.

My first Christmas "on my own," that is, the first Christmas I was working for a church which meant the first Christmas I wasn't with my family, my roommate and I decided we would have our own Merry Little Christmas. We got ourselves a tree and even wrestled it into a stand. And then ... there was a disagreement. I grew up with all manner of colored lights all over the tree. My roommate grew up with white lights in carefully placed rows all over the tree. You see where this is going. We both had very clear visions of how it was "supposed to be." Those visions didn't line up.

That's why we need Joseph at Christmas. It's tempting to think we don't. After all, he has exactly no lines. He is not the part anyone gets excited about playing in a pageant. He seems to just stand there. My friend Emily has a five year old daughter, Clara. Emily is teaching her the Christmas story using a basic Nativity set. The first time they set it up together, Emily asked Clara to name each of the characters. Now, Clara is a preacher's kid who has been in church school before she knew what church school was. She knew Mary and Jesus. She knew the shepherds and the wise men. She knew the animals and the angels. But when Emily pointed to Joseph, Clara was stumped. Finally, she guessed: "Barn boy?" Poor Joseph.

But we really do need him, especially around this time of year, especially when we are so steeped in tradition. Because tradition is a good thing. It makes us who we are. Sometimes, though, tradition can also be our undoing. And Joseph, the more I think about it, I think Joseph might be able to teach us about tradition — both its value and its cost — better than anyone else in all of Scripture.

Joseph's life starts out in the traditional way. Born and raised in Bethlehem, a small town outside of Jerusalem. At some point, his family moved 90 miles north to Nazareth. He was a carpenter, though we don't know that until much later in Matthew's Gospel when someone incredulously asks about Jesus, "Is that really the carpenter's son?" Presumably Joseph's father was a carpenter, too, as trades were handed down the family line.

He came from a distinguished family, from the House of David. And he himself was distinguished enough to be betrothed, to be engaged to Mary. All of which is well and good, until it isn't, because, as Matthew puts it, "before they lived together, she was found to

be with child from the Holy Spirit." And then we hear, "But her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

To fully appreciate Joseph's story, we have to remember that Joseph lived not only in a different time, but in a different culture. Now, not everything has changed about the way women are treated, but many things have changed. In the ancient world, pregnancy outside of marriage brought shame and dishonor to the mother-to-be, the father-to-be, and to their entire families. Now, in some cases, even today, this is still true. Not always, thankfully, but sometimes. The thing to remember here, though, is that Joseph, like all of us, like every other human being in human history, was a product of the time and culture in which he lived. And he knows two things: One: Mary is pregnant. Two: It's not his.

That's why Matthew is so quick to remind us that Joseph is righteous. What that means, in Biblical talk, is that he is well-schooled in the religious tradition of his time. And that tradition taught, Jewish law taught, that if a woman is accused of adultery, the matter is brought before the town elders.

If it is shown that her husband is lying, the husband is charged a fee of 100 shekels of silver. But if it is shown that the charge is true, the woman is to be taken to the door of her father's home, and the men of the village gather and stone her to death. In so doing, the tradition of the law states, you purge the evil from your midst.

That's righteousness. Or it's what righteousness is often thought presumed to be: the purging of evil in order to pursue the good. Joseph could have had Mary put to death. Tradition allowed for it. But, Matthew tells us,

he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, and he planned to dismiss her quietly.

But while that means Mary would escape with her life, we have to wonder what sort of life she would be left with. Pregnancy is something that can be hidden only for so long. She would be on her own, shamed and dishonored for being alone, and further shamed and dishonored for being a single mother. Odds are good that in that time, in that culture, she and her child would not survive long, or if they did, that survival would be painful and perilous. Such a decision could save Joseph, though. It would enable him to leave, quietly.

If Joseph had done this, we probably would never have heard the story of Jesus. At least not the way it comes to us today. It's interesting to think about, isn't it? Of course we remember how Mary says yes. We — or at least I — tend to forget how Joseph has to say yes, too. We aren't told much of how his 'yes' comes to be: only that Joseph has a dream. An enormous, life-changing dream, in which an angel visits him and says, "Don't be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. She's going to have a child, a child conceived by the Holy Spirit, but you will be the one to name him — you will be the one to call him Jesus."

For those of you keeping tabs, a "traditional" Christmas for the Holy Family went out the window a good while ago. The vision of what their family life was supposed to be, and the vision of what is now in front of Joseph — those visions don't line up, not at all.

The angel seems rather unconcerned by this, however. The angel simply says, "She's going to have a baby, Joseph, and please — please — raise it as your own." You see, in those days, to name a child was to lay claim to that child's heritage and lineage. In other

words, as one preacher puts it, Joseph is being asked "to be willing to believe in the impossible, to claim the scandal, to adopt it and give it his name, to not only accept the whole mess, but to rock [tenderly to sleep] it in his arms."¹

Joseph is a righteous man. No matter what choice he makes, he will still be righteous. But the angel is asking him to choose what scholars describe as a higher righteousness. That sort of righteousness is hard to come by, because it's not righteousness that focuses on the law. It focuses on the bigger picture, and it always leans toward love. Toward the well-being of others. This higher righteousness pays attention to the consequences, the sometimes unrighteous consequences that come from our efforts to be righteous. It does not ask, what does the law allow me to do? It asks, what does love compel me to do? What will bring the most light and life into the situation?

It is in this swirl of dreams and consequences that Joseph has to make his decision. He has to balance tradition and law on the one side, and an angel of the Lord seemingly on the other. He has to think about how much one person can handle, what integrity means, and what the bounds of commitment really are, to say nothing of figuring out to whom or to what he is most committed. It is a lot to think about. It's a big question, whether he will permit God to be born, whether he will stay in the midst of it all, and give his thus-far untarnished name to a scandalous child.

That Joseph says yes to this just might be the biggest miracle recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

It is certainly the biggest miracle that you or I have access to. Because this is the

¹ Barabara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*..

uncomfortable truth: God is always coming to us in ways that allow us to turn him down. We want Christmas to be the way we always remember it. With the right color lights and the right carols. We'd like it just the way it's always been, please. There's a lot on our plates. Christmas is just a few days away. There are presents to purchase and packages to wrap. There's turkey or tofu to be cooked, or reservations to be made. There's family to gather, and airline tickets to buy. There's a lot going on, it's not all done yet, and then, right in the middle of it all, comes this question to all of us: "Will you give your name to God's latest idea? Will you permit God to be born, because that is still God's intention — to be born, to be with us, to be Emmanuel, again today, still today."

Because that is the most sacred tradition of all: the tradition of God who shows up and invites us into something new, something unexpected, something that can save us all — if we let it.

"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."