

Advent 4, Year A
The Very Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
December 18, 2022
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Get Me Out of This

Get me out of this. Don't you imagine that's Joseph prayer when he learns that Mary, his fiancée, is pregnant with a baby that isn't his?

Get me out of this.

The angel Gabriel had visited Mary and told her she'd been selected to bear a son sent from God by supernatural means. Mary said, "Yes, I'm available. Let it happen as you've said."

Mary said, *Yes*. And Mary's *yes* creates Joseph's *oh no*. *Get me out of this.*

Mary's *yes* creates Joseph's predicament.

Who among us has not been in a situation where somebody else's decisions, somebody else's behaviors, someone else's actions or inactions have created a circumstance that we ultimately must deal with? It can feel unfair, would you agree? Unfair because we may wind up with responsibilities or obligations we never anticipated for untangling something that has been knotted up for a very long time or dealing with something that was a mess a long before we arrived on the scene.

Matthew's gospel says Joseph is a righteous person. Not *self*-righteous; righteous. A righteous person is one who takes care to maintain right relationships with other people, with self, and with God.

Because he's a righteous person, he doesn't want to shame or embarrass Mary or her family. It's a safe bet he'd prefer not to embarrass himself or his family either.

It seems he had wanted to marry her, but he doesn't want to anymore if she's having someone else's child. And he doesn't have to marry her now. The contract between them is dissolved on account of her pregnancy. So, he tries to figure out the best way to extricate himself, to get out of it.

I'll take care of it quietly, he thinks. Let her know the engagement is off. Then I'll go my way, and she can go hers. What happens to her and the baby really isn't my concern. That will get me out of this.

He must have gone to bed feeling better about things; not necessarily feeling happy but feeling better; relieved because he has a plan in place. He goes to sleep.

The angel Gabriel visited Mary while she was awake. An angel visits Joseph in a dream as he sleeps and says,

“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.”

Mary says *yes* to Gabriel. Joseph doesn't say anything to his angel visitor, according to Matthew. He doesn't say anything, but upon awaking he acts. He takes Mary as his wife; and when the baby is born, he names him Jesus as he had been instructed by an angel in a dream.

Is there a connection between the angel in the dream calling Joseph “son of David” and Joseph's changed plans and subsequent actions when he awakes? Maybe so.

“Son of David” seems a nice, respectable phrase. It indicates a descendant of a king. It indicates some other things as well, for David was a complex and sometimes conflicted person just like all the rest of us.

David *was* a king, and also a dancer, a youngest child, a shepherd, and a crack shot with a slingshot brave enough to take on a giant one-on-one and win. He was God's anointed, and he was also an adulterer and an accomplice to murder.

Maybe hearing the angel address him as *Joseph, son of David* reminded Joseph of all those things about his ancestor David, not just the pretty ones. And maybe he remembered other things about other ancestors as well. Maybe that recollecting purified his conscience, as today's collect says, and prepared him to act.

Our gospel today is from the first chapter of Matthew. Our story about Joseph starts with verse eighteen. The first seventeen verses of the chapter present Joseph's genealogy from Adam to Joseph to Jesus, a total of forty-two generations. It's an all-male genealogy that stops five times along the way to inject the names of five women in sexually ambiguous circumstances whose lives and contributions

turned stories of calamity into narratives of God's deliverance. The five women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. They are all progenitors of Jesus through whose audacious behavior in the midst of adverse circumstances divine power was made manifest.

Joseph could probably recite his genealogy by heart; it would remind him that multiple times among his people—his forebears, the people from whom he descends—multiple times calamity was turned into deliverance.

Perhaps remembering the predicaments his forebears had come through gave him courage to deal with his own predicament. Even if he didn't share DNA with the baby Mary would bring into the world, he could draw on the resilience of his forebears to participate in the new thing the angel said God was doing.

By the time this first chapter of Matthew ends, Joseph has acted courageously and faithfully. The predicament he initially sought to get out of has become the beginning of God's greatest intervention into human history, and Joseph has played a key part in it.

Author and researcher Jim Collins, whose books include *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*, has spent some time thinking about the pace and pervasiveness of change in our world and the ongoing emergence of new-to-us predicaments. He quotes Edward T. O'Donnell, a professor of history who said, "History is the study of surprises." Following from this, Jim Collins writes, "We are living history, surprise after surprise after surprise. And just when we think we've had all the big surprises for a while, along comes another one. If the first two decades of the 21st century have taught us anything, it's that uncertainty is chronic, instability is permanent, disruption is common, and we can neither predict nor govern events."

This Advent season is one of preparing for the coming of God in Christ, preparing and making room for the advent of Messiah, digging in and doing, with God's help, the hard work of untangling problems, smoothing out rough places, clearing out obstacles of various kinds that prevent human flourishing in families, in congregations, and in communities.

We are called to be willing to be used of God in the transformation of predicaments into narratives of deliverance, of God's grace. We are called. It's a tall order.

How do we know we can do this? Because the tangled circumstances in which we live are no more twisted than those of Joseph's situation or Joseph's family into whose care God incarnate is born. And we who follow Jesus claim all of these forebears of Joseph and Jesus as our own. Remember the history of our forebears in faith. God is always turning calamity into deliverance.

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent and the fourth Sunday of the new church year in which Matthew is our gospel companion. The crucial question underlying Matthew's gospel is, *How do we face change?* This question will resonate all year long as we engage Matthew's gospel.

It's a good year for us to walk with Matthew figuring out how to face change because we are facing a lot of it as a congregation and as a community. And the entire nation and the whole world are face to face with many, many changes, predicaments, many of them not very pleasant ones.

And repeatedly we will see that Matthew's answer to how we face change is by doubling down on the reality of Emmanuel, God with us. Repeatedly we will see that salvation in Matthew's gospel is God's presence to us, with us, in us. Emmanuel, God with us, in a baby entering the world in chapter one who grows up to declare at the very end of the very last chapter that God will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

Very soon, less than a week from now, we will celebrate once more Emmanuel's advent to dwell with us. And so, in this space, this oasis away from the crazy, we pray again in the words of today's collect, "Purify our conscience, almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself."