

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

We are three days away from Christmas! I am one of those people who love the days leading up to Christmas too. I love all the glittery and shiny decorations and the lights and everyone wearing their glittering shiny clothes to Christmas parties and all those fun Christmas sweaters and all the cute little Christmas pins. I love the Christmas pins and all of those yummy buffets that are overflowing with the sweets and the treats.

And I really enjoyed the Christmas parties that I've been to this year. Most of them were through the church and they've all been so much fun and festive and we all laugh together. And in one, we even sang Christmas carols together. But I admit that my favorite pastime at parties are the Christmas games, and I actually really love the trivia games. So I love it when they ask, what is the number one played Christmas song that's requested? Answer? Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas is You. Or what country do they fill children's clogs with candy to celebrate Christmas? Yeah. The Netherlands. Or when was Rudolph the red nosed reindeer created?

This one stumped me. It wasn't even a hundred years ago. It was in 1939, a guy named Robert May, he worked as a copywriter at Montgomery Ward, and they were usually giving out Christmas coloring books that they bought and then gave away to children to get the children to come into the department store. And that was getting expensive, so Robert May's boss said, why didn't you make up a Christmas poem? And you know what? Kids like animals, so make it about an animal.

So I love these Christmas trivia games, but the truth of the matter is that my favorite are the biblical ones, partly because I make up the questions. And so there's the easy ones, like who were the first people to visit the Baby Jesus? The shepherds. Okay. And then what did the wise men follow to find Baby Jesus? The star. And then comes the trickier ones. Which of the four gospels has the birth narrative? Luke and Matthew. But if you said the Gospel of John and argued because of the prologue; in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, I'd give you the points.

And then comes the trick questions. How many wise men? Right? We always think it's three because of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The answer, it doesn't say. So it could be two, it could be 20. Or how about this? What was Joseph's hometown? The answer is it depends on which gospel. Because in the Gospel of Luke, Joseph's hometown is Nazareth. But he ends up going to Bethlehem. Why? Because of that census. Right? And so he has to go to where his family of origin is from. And so that's why they're on the road. That's why they end up with Mary being pregnant and getting ready to deliver. That's why there's no room in the inn. And that's why Jesus was born in a manger.

But in the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph's hometown is Bethlehem, and technically Jesus was born at home. It's kind of interesting, you know, comparing these stories from the gospel, Matthew and Luke, because they really don't match. And in Luke, we have the annunciation, we have in the Angel Gabriel showing up to Mary and telling her that she will be with child. And we have Mary singing the Magnificat and we have Jesus being born in a manger. And we have the shepherds and the angels. And none of that is in the gospel of Matthew. And it's only in Matthew that we have the visitation from the wise men

These gospels are telling two completely different stories, but there is one detail that they both share. Can you guess the Virgin birth? Both of them say Mary is with child. And the babe is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now, in Luke's narrative, we get to hear how Mary reacts to that news first with a great question. Um, how can this be? And then with a declaration; here am I the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.

But in Matthew's narrative, Mary never says a word. And we have this unique insight into Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus, and how he handles all of this. I'm actually really quite fascinated by Joseph, we get a sense from the story that he's a good guy, right? I mean, he's of sound character. The scriptures call him righteous. He's engaged to Mary, and I like to think that, you know, he's pretty excited about marrying Mary. Maybe he saw her across the way in Bethlehem, and he's like thinking about how idyllic their life will be when they finally come together. And they'll have lots of kids and he's got his carpenter business going, it's all going to be super great. And then he finds out she's pregnant.

Can you imagine how that first conversation went? Mary: I'm pregnant. Joseph: Who's the father? Mary: God. And I ask you what was Joseph to believe? Mary's claim of immaculate conception was simply ridiculous. I mean, anyone today who claims that, we would say you're ridiculous. So I can't blame Joseph for dismissing it.

And so what is the only explanation left? Mary met someone else. So Joseph has some decisions to make. So an option of what he can do would be to do what was prescribed by the day and his faith. Tell the truth to the community. Adultery was a serious offense, and in those days, being engaged was a contractual obligation between families. So if you cheated on your betrothed during the engagement, you could be punished for adultery. And the punishment, at least for women, was stoning.

But Matthew tells us that Joseph did not want Mary to suffer from public disgrace, which to me speaks so highly of Joseph's character. So he had two other options. His second option is that he could marry her and take her as a wife and forever have to deal with the fact that they have a child that doesn't belong to him. And he'd have to sort of try to understand why Mary's the way she is. She would have to try to deal with the person who doesn't really trust her, and it doesn't sound like a really healthy marriage.

And I like to think that Joseph had enough of a sense of self worth that he knew it would not be good for him to engage in this kind of sort of sacrificial martyrdom and marry someone he didn't trust. So he decided on option three. Quietly break off the engagement

with no explanation to the community. Try to pick up the pieces of his life and free Mary presumably to marry the bloke who caused the problem in the first place.

And having made up his mind, Joseph went to bed and then something extraordinary happens. Just as extraordinary as the Virgin birth, if you ask me, Joseph has a dream and in it he hears words that are directed to him. 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, because He will save His people from their sins.

There are some people who do not have vivid dreams, but I do. I usually remember my dreams. I paid attention to the most recent dream I had. I dreamt that there was this woman who I knew, but I can't tell you who she was, but I knew her. And she was sitting there and she was like urgently speaking to me, trying to tell me something about Pearl Harbor.

And I was trying to understand why she was talking to me about Pearl Harbor. And then my cat, Poppy, shows up and starts to try to bite my hand. And I woke up. I've learned a long time ago, never to pay any attention to my dreams, but Joseph took his dream seriously. And it made me realize that perhaps it wasn't just a dream that changed Joseph's mind, but something really important in Joseph's nature and his character, Joseph was willing to be wrong.

It took an act of God to convince him, but this wasn't like a pillar of fire or the presence of the angel Gabriel. It was just a dream. And because of that dream, he chose option four. Mary is telling the truth to me and I will marry her and I will treat this child as God with us. Emmanuel.

Now mind you, option four turned out to be the hardest of them all. Because the dreams and directives did not stop, and it was now not just Mary's life that was on the line. It was also Joseph's. Joseph had another dream warning him that Herod was coming to kill all the children under two in Bethlehem.

And so now he and Mary and Jesus become refugees fleeing from political terrorism and end up in Egypt in a country where they don't know the language and the customs and the ways, and they have to figure out how to live life in a place they don't understand all over again. And then after Herod dies, another dream comes to him telling him to return to Israel.

So he goes back and he tries to go to Bethlehem, but he finds out, yes, Herod is dead, but Herod's son is ruling and he's just as afraid. And so he has one more dream that says, well, don't go to Bethlehem, go to Nazareth. And that's why he settled in Nazareth and there he tries to make something of his life that's been a disaster since he met Mary. It turned out that option four cost him dearly.

I have decided that Joseph in the Christmas story plays just as significant a role as Mary does. I mean, Mary's always held up to us as a role model. She says, yes, and she's obedient and she's sacrificing for the sake of the whole world. But I think Joseph is a great moral role model too. And I like to think of him as Saint Maybe because before he goes from no

to, yes, he has to go to maybe, maybe I'm wrong about Mary, maybe I can believe and support her. Maybe I can say yes to this and just be open to whatever God has in store for me. Maybe I'm called to this.

Saying maybe opened Joseph up to surely what were some of the most difficult parts of his life. And I wonder if when he said maybe, maybe he thought it was a mistake. This wasn't the idyllic life that he had dreamed and hoped for. But sometimes when we say maybe it brings its own blessings, blessings that we would never, ever experience unless we're open to saying, maybe I can believe in this. Maybe I can do this. Maybe I should step out in faith.

At the beginning of this month, on the first Sunday of Advent, the chapel over here, St. Paul's Chapel, was set up with some extraordinary Nativity scenes that came from church members that they had collected that were from all around the world. It was really quite beautiful and striking. And right before worship service on the first Sunday of Advent, I had a little bit of extra time, and so I wandered over there and I started to look at all of them, and each one had some explanation to it.

And tucked in on the corner of the ledge of the window there was a Nativity set that really struck me. And so I asked John Buhl, who's a parishioner who was there guiding and really guarding the exhibit and making sure that, you know, little hands and big hands didn't touch everything. And he was so wonderful. And I said, "Hey John, can you snap a photo of this?" And he lovingly obliged. And that is the picture that's on the front of your bulletin.

This Nativity set belongs to Anne Hiemstra. She too is a member of our parish, and she discovered the beautiful wooden set on a trip to Italy. And in her explanation of the scene Anne wrote, "A unique feature of this set is that the figure of Joseph, as well as the figure of Mary, can hold the Baby Jesus figure. Although I suspect the designers only intended for Joseph to hold the lamp." But Anne set it up so Joseph is gazing lovingly on the result of him saying maybe.

And it occurs to me that even so Joseph ended up having his whole life turned upside down, in the midst of it, even step-dad, Joseph would be blessed by his willingness to put his trust in God. As we approach this stunning night, this amazing night when God comes down to us in order to care for us and in order to save us, I lift up to you our brother Joseph.

Because maybe during this Christmas season you're confused about the mess that is your life. And maybe you said maybe to something and you took a chance and now nothing is as you thought it would be. Maybe like Joseph, you took a leap of faith and your whole life feels like it doesn't make much sense at all. Sometimes you just have to throw your arms open wide, admit that you don't know what you're doing, embrace your inability to know what is next, and then look down because in your arms you will witness that God is there as present as God was to Joseph when he held Jesus in his arms. And you will be assured that indeed you're doing exactly what you need to be doing. And in the midst of that. You too can whisper, Emmanuel, God is with me. Amen.

[End of Recording]