

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 ~ Matthew 1:18-25

Name Him Jesus

December 22, 2019 ~ Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Introduction to Scripture

What child is this? That's exactly the question Matthew sets out to answer with *his* story of the "birth" or "genesis" (same word in Hebrew) of Jesus. After 17 verses of lineage, names that began with Abraham, all told 14 generations times three, comes our Gospel lesson. Our story starts with the word, "Now." What "now" is he talking about? Matthew paints the birth of Jesus as the story of the new creation, bringing us back to the Garden of Eden, a new chance to restore creation and all her creatures through LOVE. Now. This grandiose plan of salvation, of healing for the whole world, hangs on the thinnest of threads. Today's story is one of them. If you listen carefully, you will notice that the story of Jesus' birth was about to end, before it ever began. Then an angel intervened and spoke to Joseph in the dark of the night through a dream. Today, on the morning after *our* longest night of 2019, let us listen to the story of our Lord's adoption that hung on Joseph's willingness to take a risk, a big risk for Love's sake, when he *could have chosen* otherwise.

Sermon:

My name is Joseph and I have a problem. A big problem. Will this night ever end? When I went to bed, I thought I had it figured out. I had come up with a just and lawful solution to my problem. But then I had a vivid dream. The kind you can't stop thinking about. It's hard to explain and I know it sounds crazy, but someone came to me (maybe it was an angel) and now I'm back to square one. Here's my problem. As I told you, my name is Joseph. But what I didn't tell you, was that I am Joseph, the son of Jacob, grandson of Matthan, great grandson of Eleazar... I could keep going all the way back to King David and even Father Abraham. Believe it or not, they are all my relatives. A jackpot lineage, you might say. And you may think it would be great to be me--to be born into this holy family of patriarchs. But believe me, it isn't. So much is expected of me, so much is laid upon my shoulders. But I am a man who prefers the back seat of the synagogue, and the solitude of my work bench.

I inherited a tradition that lives and breathes by the Torah—our Law. Before I could walk, I was learning the law. Don't get me wrong—I love the Law because the Law is how we stay connected to the steadfast love of God. Apart from the law, our blessed covenant with God, we are nothing. And that's why I'm so confused right now. Last night in my dream, I think I was told by an angel of the Lord--to break the law. At least the law as I understood it.

Here's my problem. It's hard to say out loud. First you need to know this about me: I've always been pretty predictable. Some might call me "boring." I have established a pretty good carpentry business. O.K., well I do still borrow tools from my dad, but that's because I've been saving as much money as possible so that in another six months, I would have enough to take Mary into my home. And then my life would be complete. That was my goal and I was making steady progress toward it.

Let me tell you about Mary. She is much more interesting than I am. First of all, she is beautiful. I don't mind telling you—all my friends are jealous. A year ago, she turned 13 years old and I had our marriage ratified according to our law. Her sister and my brother served as witnesses. Then she went back to live with her parents for another year, and I have been working hard and waiting. And waiting. For a year now, my whole goal has been to save money and prepare to move from the betrothal to the marriage stage, when we finally become husband and wife in every way. I had been counting the days eagerly, imagining the beauty and excitement she would bring into my otherwise predictable, routine life. All was going perfectly-- Until I found out that she is *pregnant!* What? My Mary? How could that possibly be?

When I went to sleep last night, I had come up with a plan to bend our interpretation of the law. I was going to do this because I love her. Now, that doesn't mean I understand her. But I knew I wanted to help her. Our book of Deuteronomy commands nothing less than death by stoning for her crime. Luckily, the rabbis have eased up on their literal interpretation of this law, but I knew the public humiliation of a trial would be too awful for her and for me. So, I decided to use some of my family connections to make the divorce proceedings private. This would minimize the pain for her. And for me, too. Truth is, I am in love with her. But laws are laws. And so, I came up with the best plan I could think of.

But then I had this dream where someone claiming to be the angel of the Lord told me not to divorce Mary, but to take her as my wife, because the child in her womb was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that he would be our Messiah. Did you catch all of that? Mary, my little Mary, would give birth to the One we have been waiting hundreds of years for, the One who would save us from our sins! It seems even crazier when I say it out loud. So crazy it must have been an angel of the Lord. How could I make something like this up?

And now I have to make a hard decision. My mind keeps racing back and forth. One minute I think, what did I do wrong to get into this mess? The next minute I think, what did I do right to deserve such an honor? Me, the father chosen to raise the child born to be our Messiah. And this my first child! Is this a curse or a blessing? I'm a carpenter and I like to work with my hands, I like to make materials I can see and measure, cut to specs, and fit together if I get my measurements and my cuts right. But there is no design, no drawing, nothing to see and no law in the Torah, to explain exactly what's going on... Besides, what is God thinking: what kind of a Messiah would be born to my shy, backward Mary and quiet, "I-prefer-to-fade-into-the-woodwork" me? Am I stuck in a scandal or a part of a miracle? Right now, my head is pounding. No more sleep tonight. Now I have to decide: What is the right thing to do?....

Joseph had no idea what he was getting himself into, when he decided to believe the angel and adopt this baby by naming him Jesus. If he knew what lay ahead, do you think he would have still taken that risk for Love's sake? Who among us would have said "yes" to the hardest good decisions in our lives -- if we knew how hard they would really be? Thank God for us and for all the world, Joseph said "yes" to this scary, crazy, risky call. That doesn't mean he understood much beyond his choice to stick with Mary and see this thing through. That's why it's called, "the peace that passes understanding." Perhaps Joseph believed in the power of his

baby's name, Jesus, which at its Hebrew root "yesh" means "to deliver, to rescue." Perhaps his life of living in covenant prepared him, readied him to make this leap. Who knew, Love would come down as a baby boy that needed Joseph to adopt him.

God gives each of us that choice, too. You might call it, the adoption option. It's an option because love, divine or otherwise, cannot be forced. Love, by definition, is freely chosen. God gives each of us the option to adopt and name Jesus as Savior or not. God knows, and we know in our more honest moments, that we need to be saved. God knows our earth needs to be saved, our democracy needs to be saved. It's so easy to get side-tracked, or get side-ways from God's way of DIVINE LOVE and justice. One bad choice can lead to another until we are so far down the rabbit hole, we can hardly recognize ourselves, or our country, or our beautiful earth.

Indeed, our salvation still hangs on a thread. A golden thread called LOVE. The Love that Came Down in the baby Jesus. And comes down, whenever we take a risk for Love's sake. I have one more story to tell. This story also happened in the dark of a long night to a woman who had a different kind of problem than Joseph did. Her name is Auburn Sandstrom and she told her story live on the Moth, which I will tell (in part) here, in her words:

It's 1992 Ann Arbor, Michigan. I'm curled up in a fetal position, on a filthy carpet, in a very cluttered apartment and I'm in horrible withdrawal from a drug I've been addicted to for several years now. In my hand is a dilapidated piece of paper, made soft by the number of times I had been folding and unfolding it. There's a phone number on it. And if you've ever had an anxiety attack, that's what this felt like. I'd been having an anxiety attack non-stop for five years. I was in a dark and desperate place... If I could, I would have jumped out of my own skin and run out into the street, but behind me in the same room sleeping, was my baby boy.

Now I wasn't going to get mother of the year award in 1992---...At the age of 29 I was failing at a lot of things. I had been raised in comfort and privilege. I had a master's degree, I was pedigreed...I decided I needed to strip all that away, I wanted to shed my class... if I could I would have shed my race. But instead of transformation, I was going 90 miles an hour down I-94, with our baby in a car seat covered in candy and chocolate. You have to keep the baby entertained so you can do your business...This particular night it was bad because I was on parole, my husband was on probation, and if we had been pulled over, we would have been locked up, and our child would have been taken from us. I was leading a life that would lead me to losing the most precious thing I'd ever had in my life.

I was so desperate that I began to be willing to punch the numbers on that paper into my phone. My mom, whom I hadn't talked to, nor any of my family or friends for years, had given me this number of a Christian counselor, saying, "since you're not talking to me, maybe you will talk to this person." That night I'm so desperate and so anxious, emaciated, and covered in bruises, I punched in the numbers. I hear the phone pick and a man say, "hello", and I say, "Hi, I got this number from my mother. Do you think you can maybe.. talk to me?" You could tell he was pulling some of his sheets around him and sitting up, turned off his radio, and became very present. He said, "Yes, yes, what's going on?"

I hadn't told anyone the truth, including myself, for a long, long time. And I told him I wasn't feeling so good and that I was scared. And that things had gotten pretty bad in my marriage. And that I might have a drug problem. And that I really love my husband but he has hit me a few times. And there was the time he tried to push me and my baby out of a moving vehicle. But I love him.

This man didn't judge me. He just sat with me, and had such a kindness, "Oh, that must hurt." "Tell me more." I'd made that call probably at 2 in the morning, and he stayed with me the whole night until the sun rose. By then, I was feeling calm, like I could splash my face with water, and thought-- I can probably do this day. It didn't matter to me what his faith was, he could be a Hare Krishna. I was very grateful to him. So, I said, "aren't you supposed to be telling me to read some Bible verses?" He laughed and said, "I'm glad this was helpful for you." We talked some more and I brought it around again and asked, "How long have you been a Christian counselor." "OK, Auburn, I've been trying to avoid this subject. I need you right now not to hang up. But the number you called?... Wrong number."

I didn't hang up on him. I never learned his name. Never talked to him again—and I don't think I took any of his advice. But the next day I felt something that I've heard called, "the peace that passes understanding." Because I had experienced that there was random love in the universe, and that some of it was unconditional and that some of it was for me. I can't tell you that I got my life totally together that day. But it became possible. And it also became possible for me to take that sticky, chocolate-covered baby boy and raise him up into a young honors scholar-athlete who graduated from Princeton University in 2013 with honors. This is what I know: In the deepest, blackest night of despair and anxiety, it only takes a pinhole of light and all of grace can come in.ⁱ

It only took one tiny baby born in backwater Bethlehem born to an unwed mother Mary, and his adopted dad, Joseph---to bathe the world in grace. This amazing grace, this, unstoppable, inscrutable, unconditional Divine Love *can* save us and unite us. That's what the name Jesus means. He is the Prince of Peace that Passes Understanding, LOVE that came to deliver us from our world of hurt. Love takes her time. And Love takes community. Like Joseph—we have a problem, too. Lot's of problems, if we are honest. Our earth has a problem. Our country has lots of problems. God is not calling on anyone of us, or any one church to do it all. Joseph adopted Jesus and raised him as best he could. That was enough for Joseph to do. A grace-infused stranger, stayed on the phone all night with Auburn. That was enough for her to make her turn.

What child is this? The One who is enough to save us. If we choose take a risk, for Love's Sake.

ⁱ The excerpt of Auburn Sandstrom's Moth story I dictated from this link: <https://themoth.org/stories/a-phone-call>.