

Joseph's Silent "Yes"

Matthew 1:18-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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We've reached the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. This week, we arrive at Christmas, the coming of the Christ child.

As you likely know by now, we have been focusing this season on the "yeses" in and around the Christmas story and pondering what they might say to us as we seek to say "yes" to God's movement in our own lives.

We looked at Elizabeth and Zechariah and John the Baptist and Mary, and the various ways, implicit and explicit, that they said "yes" to God's breaking into the story (of their lives and of the world).

This Sunday, we encounter the story of Joseph.

As is so often the case in the story we tell each year during the Advent and Christmas seasons, Joseph's is a story of responding to the God who surprises, the God who does not act in expected ways.

The God who surprises...

I think we are losing the capacity to be surprised—by each other, by the world around us, by God. Too often, we assume we know the story—whether it's a story in the news or the story of a human life—without letting the story come to us on its own terms.

A few years ago, I came across an article by a journalist named Amanda Fortini called "Real Life Does Not Fit the Narrative."¹

I was struck by a few passages. Here's what she says:

¹ <https://www.thefp.com/p/real-life-does-not-fit-the-narrative>

When I teach college journalism classes, I tell my students to go out and report on events as they unfold, letting their stories arise from whatever they find, while ignoring the expectations or preconceived notions they had at the start. **The real world, I tell these impressionable young writers, is always more fascinating than the ideas we hold about it.** Reality, truth, the bizarre behavior of people in the wild—they will always surprise you.

In our current media climate, where facts are subordinated to various master narratives, and everything is viewed through an ideological lens, my advice might seem obsolete, I realize. For a while now, on broadcast news, in magazines and newspapers—and certainly in “content” that goes viral on social media—there is a conspicuously growing lack of stories that are complex, surprising, and seemingly told for their own sake...

Not only are these narratives untrue, they’re also uninspired and formulaic. They feel engineered with a takeaway in mind, assembled from a kit—with a moral, a villain, and a hero. **They lack the pleasing strangeness of reality...** As you consume them, there’s no sense of discovery or revelation. I find them pat, predictable, deadening. They bore me.

I think she is right about this. I, too, tire of stories crammed through an ideological grid, stories that don’t do justice to the complexity and strangeness of reality, stories that aren’t open to a surprise.

Fortini goes on:

[Annie Dillard once said] **“The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright.”** A satisfying true story tends to be complicated and irreducible. Reality is messy.

Amanda Fortini’s article is about journalism not Christmas, but you could hardly find a better description of the story that we tell each year at Christmas time.

It is wild in all directions. It is dangerous and messy. It is extravagant and it is bright. It is the story of the true light coming the world in the most unlikely of ways.

It's interesting to pay attention to how the gospels tell the story of Jesus. Our bibles have four gospels, of course, each reflecting Jesus through their own unique lens.

Of the four gospels, only two—Matthew and Luke—narrate the story of Jesus' birth.

Mark is so excited to get to Jesus' kingdom announcement, that he skips over Jesus' birth and childhood entirely and begins with John the Baptist and Jesus in the Jordan.

John begins in the deep end of the theological pool. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...* But he is silent about the actual historical events of Christmas.

Luke goes into the greatest detail about Jesus' birth and spends a lot of time on the angelic visitations and stories of Mary and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

It is Matthew who invites us to consider the story from Joseph's perspective.

I think a lot about Joseph at Christmastime.

Mary gets most of the headlines, and for good reason. She sings the song of the season, the Magnificat, which we looked at last week.

She is the object of devotion, admiration, even reverence around the world. We hail her, full of grace. Some call her the mother of God.

Joseph is kind of like an unobtrusive piece of the Christmas furniture.

He doesn't hang around very long in the gospel narratives. He receives three angelic visitations according to Matthew, one telling him to take Mary as his wife, one telling him to flee Herod's madness, and the third telling him it's safe to return.

In each case, Joseph responds wordlessly. He simply did what the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Not a single word from Joseph's mouth is recorded in the gospels.

He takes his place in our nativity scenes, silent and compliant. We don't hear much about him once we're done with the Christmas story. He kind of just disappears.

He's referred to a few more times, to be sure. He is summoned to validate people's rejection of Jesus in Nazareth. *Is not this the carpenter's son? How could anything good come out of such unimpressive stock?*

And Luke mentions him at the commencement of Jesus' public ministry:

Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph...

Joseph is a kind of strange hiccup before business as usual is restored in tracing the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam.

*He was the son, **so it was thought**, of Joseph...*

I suppose even Luke couldn't bring himself to think of Joseph as Jesus' real father.

Joseph has a place in the story, but it's on the periphery. Joseph did what the angel commanded... He got up... He fled... He returned...

He kept his mouth shut, did what he was told.

No words from Joseph's mouth are recorded from our gospels, but our text this morning makes it clear that Joseph played a crucial role in the Christmas story of God coming to be with us people.

Joseph was faced with a choice that he would have never wanted.

Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married (in first century Jewish culture this would have been at least a one-year period), when Mary is discovered to be pregnant.

Conventional wisdom at this point in this culture would have been rather simple.

Divorce. Mary had obviously been unfaithful. The wedding would obviously be called off. Joseph owed her nothing.

Mary's fate, if the letter of the law about adultery were to be observed, would be even more tenuous.

But even *before* Joseph learns the truth about Mary's pregnancy, he resolves to take an unconventional path.

Verse 19 says that Joseph was a righteous man and decided to divorce her quietly to spare her the public scorn and disgrace that were undoubtedly coming her way, as an unwed, pregnant Jewish teenage girl.

After Joseph resolves to pursue this course, the angel appears, telling him not to be afraid, to take Mary as his wife, for the child is from the Holy Spirit.

The angel tells Joseph to name him "Jesus" (Hebrew *Yeshua* or "Joshua," which means "Yahweh saves").

Matthew links this to the prophecy from Isaiah: the virgin shall conceive a son and call him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'

God with us. The hope of Christmas.

The incarnation—God taking on human flesh in Jesus—is and has been a source of enormous comfort and consolation to Christians for the past two thousand years.

A God who would enter our experience, who would take on our flesh, who would understand what it means to be human on a deep and personal level—this is good news.

But there is more to "with" than comfort and consolation.

Jesus doesn't enter the world simply to comfort. Joseph knew this very well.

"God with us," for Joseph, meant being thrust into the middle of a scandal. It meant spending the rest of his days being known as, "Jesus' father, or so it was thought..."

Debie Thomas puts it like this:

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father, God led a "righteous" man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God's call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It required him to become the talk of the town — and not in a good way. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman whose story he didn't understand, to protect a baby he didn't father, to accept an heir who was not his son.

In other words, God's messy plan of salvation required Joseph—a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy—to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable.²

When God comes to be with us, things don't always look like we imagine it ought to.

At this time of year, we often gaze at in idyllic manger scenes with peaceful Mary and unobtrusive Joseph and the baby Jesus that conjure up emotions of hope and promise and contentment.

"God with us" was good news, certainly,

But "with" also meant a young couple running for their lives as refugees not long after this baby boy of promise was born.

For Mary, "with" would mean that, as Simeon predicted, a sword would pierce her soul—the baby boy who was Emmanuel would one day make her weep as he hung on a Roman cross.

And Joseph?" For him, God "with" us would look like a parental relationship that began in scandal and an adopted son who would probably always be a bit of an enigma to him.

Joseph's "yes" to the movement of God is one of silent submission.

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2484>

“Silence.” “Submission.” These are two words that I suspect we do not particularly care for.

We like to be heard. We like to have a say in the matter, whatever the matter happens to be.

And we like to be strong. “Submission” is a word we associate with weakness. Or worse.

But I don’t think Joseph’s submission is weakness. I think it is a deeply faithful recognition that he was being summoned to something beyond himself.

And so, he got up. He stepped into the mess and confusion with faith and hope. He did what God commanded.

He did not demand the spotlight, did not demand an explanation, did not hedge his bets. He simply took his place in the unfolding, mysterious, liberating story of God at work in the world.

Like Joseph, we do not know what “God with us” may look like in the various stages of our lives. What it might call us to do, to believe, to trust in.

We don’t know what it might ask us to endure, what hard lessons it might to teach us.

We don’t know what hopes it may yet have to unfold before us, what glorious surprises may be in our futures.

We do not always know what we *are being* or *will be* summoned to.

The same was true for Joseph. He did not necessarily know where the story was going, and he did not see what his baby boy would become.

We don’t know for certain when Joseph died, but tradition has it that it was long before Jesus wound his way to Calvary’s cross, likely even before he began his public ministry.

There’s an excellent chance that Joseph never heard his boy preach the Sermon on the Mount, saw him open any darkened eyes, touch any lepers clean, rattle any Pharisees’ chains, calm any storms, feed any crowds with a few loaves and some fish.

He was spared Mary's agony of watching her son die a cruel death, but he also missed out on the glorious surprise of resurrection.

Joseph was only around for a relatively small part of the story. He may have only been present for the part of Jesus' life that we hear next to nothing about, between when his parents lost him in the temple at age 12 and the beginning of his ministry around 30.

The silent part.

Joseph did not see how the hopes and fears of all the years would be met in the boy that he adopted as his son, the boy he fled into the desert to protect from a murderous king, the boy he brought back home when the time was right.

His part in the story was to offer a silent "yes" to the surprising movement of God.

The story of Christmas is a wild and messy and disruptive story. It is a story that likely seemed barely believable even for those in the middle of it.

It is story that has a "pleasing strangeness" that bursts through all pre-existing categories and tidy narratives about who God is, about what God wants, about how God works in the world.

The same God is alive and active in our world today.

This week Christmas arrives. Some of us are full of anticipation and joy, eager to welcome family and friends, perhaps looking ahead to a week of lights and songs and gifts and family gatherings and meals and celebrations.

Some are perhaps not feeling so joyful. Some are perhaps weighed down by heavy burdens, feeling exhausted and worn out. Some may be lonely. Others may not be feeling particularly hopeful or joyful.

And I suspect many of us are some combination of the above, depending on the day.

And yet, Christmas comes to us all. *Christ* comes to us all once again this season, whatever we are feeling or fearing, whatever we are hoping for and anticipating, however strong or weak our faith may feel at the moment.

And he summons us to follow where he leads. Even when it may confound our categories, even when it may disrupt and unsettle us.

(We can probably count on this, actually. This is our how God tends to operate.)

He comes to be with us. To save us.

Like Joseph, let us submit our wills and our lives to this God who is making and will make all things new, through the surprising child that comes to us in a manger this Christmas.

Amen.

