

Joseph: Seek Christ in the Kingdom of Anxiety

Matthew 1:18-25

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This Advent, I am setting the stories of John the Baptist, Joseph, and Mary in the context of the chorus of W. H. Auden's poem. *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. In the Chorus, Auden writes:

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

Joseph is the one in the Christmas story
whose life with Christ
leads him through anxiety and worry
with radical
(and the word "radical" means "rooted"!)
faith!

He is so quiet in the Christmas story.
We don't think of him much.
Yet, he crosses all kinds of borders,
and navigates fear and danger.
Following dreams and angels,
he journeys through so many changes and worries and anxieties:
he moves from being single to being engaged
he finds out his fiancée is pregnant
and then he wants to protect her dignity
then he marries her . . .
because of words from an angel in a dream . . .
he travels with his wife who is 9 months pregnant
all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem
over 100 miles of rocky, rough roads . . .
then the child's life is in danger
so he takes his family
all the way from northern Israel into Egypt
because of words from an angel in a dream . . .
then, years later, when it's safe again
he takes his family
back to Israel
because of words from an angel in a dream . . .
and even then,
his plans change to protect this child

because of words from another angel in a dream . . .

It's human nature to have borders.

We all have our borders and limits.

Some are physical.

Some are psychological.

We tighten our personal borders when we are anxious and afraid

When we are anxious and afraid,

we stop including and begin to exclude.

When we are anxious and afraid,

not only do we exclude others,

we often exclude God.

Yet, it is our anxiety and fear

that identify the next frontier God is calling us to face in our lives.

Of course we are afraid!

This frontier is the place where,

as poet David Whyte says,

we are called to hazard our identity,

to risk our current sense of ourselves for something larger,

for God's larger vision of who we are . . .

Of course we are afraid.

That's why God's angels always say,

"Be not afraid" . . .

"Do not be afraid" . . .

The way out is the way through . . .

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said:

"You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

And, she also said,

"Do one thing every day that scares you."

One of the pastors I worked with in California,

John Butcher,

talked about meeting our fears and anxiety

in terms of the southern expression: "might could":

the hesitancy expressed in "might"

gets followed by the "could" of new possibility . . .

so at our borders,

we can gently coach and coax ourselves across

into God's newness for us:

we "might could!"

As we stand at our own edges this Advent,

at the borders of our anxieties, worries, and fears,

I believe that what David Whyte writes about poetry

also applies to scripture

and to our own predicament today
and our need to enlarge ourselves into God's vision.

He writes:

Throughout the ages,
[the stories of scripture]
have held a special power to lend us courage,
to give us the vision of those who endured
and to hazard ourselves boldly in the world we must inhabit.

The insights and imagery
can take us
beyond any small perimeter we have made for ourselves
and call us to look life straight in the eyes.

Once we establish ourselves at this frontier,
we find ourselves living amidst revelation,
the recipients of visible and invisible help
we could not previously recognize.

[Scripture] tells us we can
not only be found by a greater world,
but also enlarge ourselves
to become participants in that new future.

[The stories of scripture] tell us
that the stakes in life are very high
and that failure is possible,
yet they do not treat living as a burden.

Suffering has its place in any human life,
and in many ways is inescapable,
yet it is also the hallmark of our incarnation,

and one of the tasks of [these stories]
is to show us how to walk into the middle of the world
and make a home,
thus emboldening and deepening our generosity to others.

When we come together
and [tell the stories of scripture],
we engage
with the frontier on which we find ourselves
at this particular point in our lives,

to understand again

the very personal nature
of our connection with the future
and to strike out boldly for that horizon. (David Whyte, adapted)

This Advent:

Like Joseph,
we are called to walk
right into the middle of the world
and make a home,
and thereby
embolden and deepen our generosity to others.

Like Joseph,
we will find ourselves living amidst revelation,
and we will be the recipients of visible and invisible help
we could not previously recognize.

Like Joseph,
we will face fear and anxiety
and, in the midst of it,
we just,
we just “might could!”
Amen.

Sources:

Academy of American Poets: W. H. Auden <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/120>
<http://www.cs.utsa.edu/~wagner/church/auden/index.html>
Clear Mind, Wild Heart by David Whyte

Texts:

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'