

Joseph was a righteous man. That means he was a good guy, he did what he should. He did what was right. Did you happen to notice what the “right thing” was in this story? According to St. Matthew, it was to divorce Mary. He had to, really; there was no choice. At that time and in that place, marriage was specifically for raising offspring—and the offspring she was going to raise wasn’t his. He couldn’t do it. He shouldn’t do it. Not only was it not in his best interest, there was a law about what should happen to women who got pregnant before they got married, and Joseph followed the law.

Except this time. Instead of doing what he should—what he had a right and an expectation to do—he decided to end things quietly, so that she would not face the full shame of a public divorce. They would quietly call things off and go their separate ways, but nobody needed to know. They’d all find out eventually, of course, because everybody always did, but it wouldn’t be from him. So already, we’re wondering: did he plan to dismiss her quietly *because* he was a righteous man, or *in spite* of it? Is what he does for Mary righteous or not?

Regardless, he is set to follow through on this intention until an angel appears with a message: that he should, instead of doing what is right, just stay the course because God is up to something. In effect, “Do nothing. Keep going. Watch what happens.” This really calls into question what it means to be “righteous,” or even simply “right.” Which is the right thing to do: To follow the law? To show compassion? To proceed as planned?

It's interesting and possibly informative to note that all the stuff about Mary and Joseph so far is in the past tense: Matthew is just setting the scene. The actual story begins with the intervention of the angel. In other words, *God* is the first one to act in this narrative, not Joseph. What does that say about all of Joseph’s righteousness? What is it worth? What does it accomplish? I’d say that, for Matthew, it doesn’t count for a hill of beans. The real focus of the story is not on anything Joseph does, but on what God does.

In that light, the angel’s message begins to make a bit more sense: “Do nothing. Keep going. Watch what happens.” If the real actor in the story is God, then what Joseph does or intends to do only really matters in light of what God is already doing. If he goes through with his plan, Mary will still be pregnant and the baby will still come, but Joseph won’t be in the picture. He will write himself out of God’s story. That tells me that in the angel’s directive to

wait, there's grace to be found. For all of Joseph's righteousness—whatever that means—the only righteousness that counts is God's.

I think that's an important point to make, because I know how quick I am to take these stories in the Bible and make them about myself: "What should I do?" "How should I be?" "What is the right thing for me to take away from this?" Given the conversations I keep having with folks about these stories, I think the same is true for a lot of us, maybe all of us.

This story comes up in the lectionary every three years, and every three years I end up having the same conversations about whether or not Mary was really a virgin. That's what we see in this text; that's where our attention goes. From what I can tell, it goes there because we have this need to figure out whether one can be a Christian without believing in immaculate conception. For some, that theological tenet has become an indicator of orthodoxy: no immaculate conception, no correct faith. But in the context of Matthew's story about Joseph here, I have to wonder: does our own theological right-ness (righteousness) matter at all? Does God even care what we "believe?"

The message of the angel to Joseph in this story is—in no uncertain terms—to rely on what God is doing rather than on his own actions. He can do whatever he wants, but if he wants to be a part of God's story, his best bet is to do nothing, to keep going, to watch what is about to happen. It makes me wonder how much our own understanding of what is "righteous"—whether that means orthodox or moral or pious—really matters at all. Often we hear God calling us to "go and do" or "come and see;" but how often might God simply be calling us to watch and wait and pay attention to what God is doing rather than to jumping in ourselves and try to act on God's behalf?

Let's back up for a minute to Isaiah's story. It's a story that none of us would know if Matthew hadn't quoted from it here, because it's a story that takes place in a very specific historical moment. Without getting too deep into the politics, King Ahaz of Judah is facing a threat from the combined forces of two other kings: Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel. The prophet Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask for a sign—"Ask for anything you can imagine," he says—of what God will do; and Ahaz refuses. His refusal sounds pious enough—"I will not put the LORD to the test,"—but the prophet is telling him to do just that! God *wants* to give Ahaz a sign; so why is he refusing?

Ahaz doesn't want a sign because he's already decided what to do. He's already decided to send envoys to Assyria to ask for help. He's already placed his trust in the giant, global superpower to the north to save him. I think he refuses a sign because he's afraid that God will tell him to do otherwise.

And that's just what God does. Isaiah, in essence, tells Ahaz the same thing the angel tells Joseph. He says, "there's a young woman who's already pregnant; by the time her son is old enough to eat solid food, the threat you fear will be gone. God's already handling this. Do nothing. Keep going. Watch what happens." The sign from God is already on the way, and nothing can stop it. That kid—regardless of what his mother names him—is a living sign that God-is-with-us, which in Hebrew, is Immanuel.

This is what is hard for both Joseph and Ahaz—and, I suspect, for us, as well: "God-with-us" so seldom looks like we expect it to. God's presence is so often characterized by confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt. The angel tells Joseph *not* to make the prudent choice. The prophet tells Ahaz *not* to bet on the sure thing. Instead, they're to wait, do nothing, and watch what happens. Instead of taking action, they are instead invited to trust that "God-is-with-us."

For Ahaz, this trust waiting means watching armies advance on Jerusalem. For Joseph, it means accepting the shame of being known as a rube and a cuckold for the rest of his life. It means accepting and embracing loss, ignominy and death. Look at Joseph: unlike Peter or Paul or John, he's never mentioned after Jesus' childhood. Most of the evangelists don't mention him at all. He's forgotten by the apostles and the entire Church until the time comes to pull him out of the cupboard each year and set him next to Mary in the Nativity display. He's a silhouette of a character.

And yet, in embracing all the shame and loss that comes with this child called "God-with-us," Joseph experiences renewal and resurrection. He turns out to be a great dad—protecting and supporting his scandalous family—and becomes the means of God's grace. His counter-righteous naming and adoption of this illegitimate child into his family becomes Jesus' connection to the Davidic lineage. Joseph may not be the hero of the story, but he doesn't need to be, because God already is, and God is with him. God is with us simply because that's who God is.

But God-with-us isn't necessarily the comfort and joy we might expect. As much as we crave a world of resurrection without death, of answers without doubt, of renewal without loss, Jesus' very existence refuses us this. He is born in shame and scandal and dies the same way; yet he also frees us from those things. In his death, he shows us how rejection, abandonment and violence somehow become the means by which God saves us from our sins—from the evil and harm we do to ourselves and one another. Even in these things, God is always with us, saving us; always has been, always will be. God is with us in all of life, and in all of death, in our experience of loss and in the renewal that comes out of that loss. Our righteousness changes that not at all one way or the other, just like Joseph's righteousness doesn't change Mary's pregnancy.

However, I don't think that the angel's message to do nothing and watch what happens is not about passivity or fatalism, but about trusting God to be God. It is about letting go of our own ideas about what is right or necessary or proper and allowing God to do what God will do. I notice that the invitation to "do nothing" doesn't mean that Joseph sits on his hands; it means he lets things happen as they will. It means he makes the hard and intentional choice to stick around while God continues to write the story.

What might this story mean for us? When does God invite us to "go and do," and when is the invitation to "wait and watch?" I don't know. How are we to proceed? What's the right—or righteous—course of action? Is it obedience to the law? Is it compassion? Is it trust in God's salvation? Yes. Maybe. Or not. Who knows? I don't think there's a single answer to that; and I think that's by design.

That uncertainty, that darkness that keeps us from seeing what lies ahead—I think that's also Immanuel. Righteousness, I think, is not ours to define or possess or achieve. But God—who is righteous—is with us, saving us from our mistakes, bringing life from death and victory from failure; saving us from the harm we do to ourselves and one another. Sometimes, all we can do is nothing; sometimes, we can only keep going and watch what happens.