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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, December 18, 2022

4 Advent, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 7:10-16](#)

[Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18](#)

[Romans 1:1-7](#)

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

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I hope we all enjoyed hearing this Joseph story just now, because we won't hear it again until 2025.

So the lectionary, which is the schedule for the scripture readings we read in church, is on a three-year cycle. Two out of the three years, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we hear the story of Mary, how the angel Gabriel announces to her that she will be the mother of Jesus. And this one year we hear the story of Joseph. Mary, 2; Joseph 1; which honestly seems more than fair given that Mary was the one who actually carried Jesus in her womb. But today we give some attention to Joseph, who was faithful and content to play his own supporting role in the story of salvation.

It is a supporting role to be sure. And while Mary will reappear in the stories of Jesus as an adult, Joseph will not. Perhaps he dies before Jesus begins his adult ministry. We know his profession, because Jesus is referred to in one place as the carpenter's son. And although one of his traditional titles is Guardian of the Incarnate Word, Joseph himself never speaks a word in scripture. Instead of hearing his words, we see his actions. You might call him the strong and silent type, but that would be misleading.

A few years ago the historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez wrote a book that turned out to be a surprise best seller. Maybe you've read it; it's called *Jesus and John Wayne*. Du Mez grew up an evangelical Christian in Iowa, and she traces the ways white evangelical Christianity in the U.S. has become bound up with a certain set of expectations about gender that a lot of us might call, frankly, toxic masculinity. One of the pastors she profiles is Mark Driscoll, who rose to prominence in the early 2000s at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, who once said the problem in the Garden of Eden was that Adam listened to his wife. Driscoll believes in male headship. He once said in a video that "the problem in the church today is it's just a bunch of nice, soft, tender, chick-ified, church boys. David, Paul, and John the Baptist were dudes. Heterosexual, win a fight, punch you in the nose, dudes."¹ When we Episcopalians elected our first female Presiding Bishop back in 2006 Driscoll's snarky response was that if we didn't man up soon maybe we would elect a fluffy bunny next.²

¹ <https://www.byfarthersteps.com/mark-driscoll-on-manly-men/>; quote reordered.

² Joel Connelly, "New bishop brings wit to the job," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (September 4, 2007): <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/connelly/article/New-bishop-brings-wit-to-the-job-1248678.php>.

A few years later Driscoll had to resign from his position at Mars Hill Church after multiple accusations of bullying as well as plagiarism, but he went on to start a new megachurch in Arizona where he serves to this day.

Now I think Mark Driscoll is kind of a jerk. But I also think he leaves something to be desired as a theologian and Bible scholar. I'm not sure where he gets the idea that Paul went around punching people in the nose, which is certainly nowhere in the Bible, although Paul willingly accepting his martyrdom certainly is. As Paul says, "my strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul knows that because he follows a Jesus who forgives his executioners, who tells his disciples to put away their swords, who says that if anyone strikes them on one cheek they're to turn the other one also. And I wonder if some of what Jesus knew about strength he learned from the man who raised him, Joseph, who uses his strength never to hurt but always to protect and care for those who are vulnerable.

What was Joseph hoping for from his marriage? Whatever it was, it wasn't to discover his fiancée pregnant, clearly not by him. In his pain and sadness and no doubt anger, Joseph nonetheless chooses not to take revenge. Even when he can only believe Mary has been unfaithful to him, he puts her safety above his rights and chooses not to expose her publicly. But then when the angel appears to him he realizes Mary has been chosen for a far greater responsibility, and he willingly takes his share in the task. Later when King Herod will threaten their newborn son, Joseph will lead his family to safety as refugees in Egypt, willingly leaving everything familiar to protect Jesus and Mary from harm.

There is a lot of talk about Biblical manhood and masculinity, most of it from people whose understanding of gender is very narrow indeed; who believe God created only two sexes and only two genders and you had better be one and fall in love with the other one and whichever one you are controls how you have to act and feel and if you don't fit that mold there is something wrong with you and God is displeased.

Personally I believe the God who is a God of limitless creativity has a little more up their divine sleeve than that. I believe when Genesis says "Male and female God created them" that was an AND and not an OR, and that masculinity and femininity are two components of a gorgeously varied rainbow of gender, that each of us combines those components in ways that are sometimes very conventional and other times very unpredictable. I believe that for freedom Jesus Christ has set us free and that freedom includes the straitjackets of norms that have more to do with power and keeping people in their place than with liberating people to live the lives God has created them for.

But if we have to talk about Biblical masculinity, if we are looking for a Biblical model of someone who seems to exemplify a set of virtues that are not exclusively but have often been considered masculine; someone who works with his hands, who provides for his family, who protects the ones he loves, who tempers justice with mercy and tenderness, who puts others' needs above his own reputation, who knows how to listen to intuition and dreams, then we could hardly do better than St. Joseph, who modeled fatherhood in such a way that for Jesus when he had grown up Father was a word that he was able to use as one of the names of God. And who also knew how to keep silence, and how to play a supporting role when his partner was called to become Mother of God. Blessed Joseph, Guardian of the Incarnate Word, pray for us, that we might be prepared to receive your son.