

## **Sermon: The messiness of today's Gospel**

What do you make of today's gospel?

It's a beautiful story but does it make sense to you? I'm not really sure it does to me. I have some doubts about it. It doesn't sound or feel real to me. Does it to you?

I struggle with today's gospel and wonder if that's really how it happened. I feel like something has been left out. It sounds implausible.

Here's how the story goes:

- Mary is a virgin engaged to Joseph. They have neither lived nor slept together.
- She's pregnant with a child from the Holy Spirit, a child that was conceived out of wedlock and not by Joseph.
- Joseph recognizes the implications for Mary and himself. He plans for them to quietly go their separate ways.
- An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him to not be afraid, that God has a plan.
- Joseph wakes up and, following the angel's guidance, takes Mary as his wife, and Jesus is born.

My doubts about the story are not that Mary is a virgin. I completely am at peace with that. Neither do I doubt that this child is from the Holy Spirit. I believe in and have experienced the creative and life-giving power of God's Spirit.

My doubt about this story is that it just seems too easy. It's too clean. It's too simple. It sounds too much like a gospel according to Hallmark kind of story.

There's not a hint of confusion, conflict, hurt feelings, fear, doubt, anger, or struggle. Neither Mary nor Joseph say a word, but I'll bet they had words or

at least questions. None of that is in the story, at least not as told by Matthew. It has been sanitized of any messiness.

Who lives in that kind of world? Do you? I sure don't.

Is your life that easy, clean, and simple? Mine's not.

There's messiness in my life and I suppose there is in yours too. And I can't imagine there wasn't messiness for Mary and Joseph. So let's read between the lines and fill in some messiness. What if the story is really more like this?

When Joseph returned from building houses in Judea he finds Mary six months pregnant, and she wasn't pregnant when he left. Her swollen womb breaks his heart. He's so distressed that he's physically trembling and slapping his own face. He falls to the ground saying, "O Lord God, receive my spirit for it is better for me to die than to live any longer."

He asks God, "Who has deceived me and committed this evil? Who has seduced her from me and defiled her?"

Then Joseph turns to Mary and asks, "Mary, what have you done? I don't understand. You've brought me shame, sorrow, and reproof." And with a flood of tears Mary responds, "I'm innocent and have not been with another man."

"Then how are you pregnant?" Joseph asks. "As the Lord my God lives," Mary says, "I don't know how this happened." She's embarrassed, and knows there is suspicion and misunderstanding about her pregnancy.

Some of Mary's friends defend her, telling Joseph, "We've been with her. No man has touched her. The angels of God speak to her every day. We can't explain this. It must be the Holy Spirit." And Joseph says, "So you want me to believe an angel of the Lord did this? Maybe someone pretended to be an angel and tricked her." And Joseph starts weeping.

He tells Mary, "Leave my house and go be with your lover. I will no longer support you. You've brought me sorrow, disgrace, and dishonor." Mary pleads with Joseph, "Please don't do this. I'm lost and confused. I don't know where I would go. I haven't done what you think I have." "Tell me who it is" Joseph demands, "and I will take his head from his shoulders."

Mary calms herself and tells Joseph about the angel and the annunciation. She doesn't understand but she trusts that Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin who conceives and bears a son is being fulfilled in her. She tells that to Joseph and his heart begins to soften but he's still afraid, doubtful, and confused. He doesn't know what to do. It's a mess and he plans "to dismiss her quietly."

What do you think of that? Doesn't that sound more real? It does to me. It makes sense and I can relate to it. I've felt those feelings. I haven't been in that particular situation but I've known that kind of messiness in my life and relationships. Haven't you? And haven't you experienced messiness in your faith and life with God? I have. I think it's the messiness in the story of Mary and Joseph that gives the story power and meaning in the messiness of our lives.

And in case you are wondering, I did not make up the story I just told. It's a part of our own tradition in scriptures and sermons that have often been quietly dismissed.\* There are reasons why those scriptures and sermons are not included in our Bible today but I wonder if part of it is that they're just too messy and we don't like messiness. Maybe that's why Matthew's account of the gospel is so clean and easy.

That's not a criticism of Matthew. It's the recognition that sometimes I also edit out, deny, or ignore the messiness in my life. There are parts of my own story that are too messy to tell. Haven't there been times when you wanted or tried to dismiss the messiness of your life? Maybe we're all like Joseph in that way. When he learned that Mary was pregnant he "planned to dismiss her quietly."

What's the messiness in your life today that you're sanitizing, denying, or ignoring? What parts of your life would you like to quietly dismiss?

Here's what strikes me. It wasn't until after Joseph woke up to the messiness of his life that Jesus was born. I wonder if in sanitizing our lives and dismissing our messiness we deny God a place with us.

We always say that Advent is a season of preparation. We are preparing for the coming of Jesus. So what if our final preparation in Advent is to acknowledge and name the messiness in our lives? What's the messiness for you today?

If you're wondering where the messiness is in your life today let me ask you this: What guilt or shame are you still carrying? What's causing you embarrassment? What is breaking your heart? What aspects of your life are keeping you confused and not understanding? What's making you feel unacceptable, unworthy, or unloveable? What parts of your life are you hiding from others but mostly from yourself? In what ways have you stepped in it? Your answers to those questions probably point to some kind of messiness.

If Jesus isn't born into the messiness of our lives and world today then what difference does his birth make? And if Jesus makes no difference then why are you here today?

I suspect you are here today for the same reason I am. My life isn't always clean and easy. As much as I might try to sanitize my life sometimes it's still a mess. And I'll bet you know what I mean.

What if Emmanuel – "God is with us" – begins in messiness? It did for Mary and Joseph, why not for us as well? Amen