

“THE OTHER ANNUNCIATION”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Matthew 1:18-25
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Down a long dark corridor in the Louvre Museum, there is a small 16th century painting, author unknown. It is a portrait of a very young man gazing out with a mixture of doubt and wonder in his eyes. It is titled simply, *Annunciation*. I saw the painting first when I was in my early twenties, wandering through the museum on a rainy afternoon, and it stayed with me—haunted me really—because of the look on the young man’s face. Five years later, a seminary graduate, I went back to the Louvre specifically to see this painting again. I didn’t even stop to glance at the Mona Lisa or the other “important” treasures of the museum. I just wanted to see if I could find this painting, and it was as I remembered it. By then, I realized what an important work of art it was theologically.

Well before the Renaissance, the Catholic Church had developed—full-blown—its theology of the Virgin Birth. Mary, not only a virgin when Jesus was conceived, but also herself immaculately conceived by St. Anne, a virgin mother. Mary, perpetually virgin: the mother, the sister, and the bride of Christ. It is a tangled and difficult doctrine. It strains credulity; and to help it along, the figure of Joseph—long an ambiguous figure in the story of Christ’s nativity—Joseph came to be depicted, if one looks at religious art, first as a middle aged man, then as an old man, then as a very, very old man—a man who could not possibly have been interested sexually in Mary, a man who could have married her to protect her status as consecrated virgin, which was the church’s contention.

The painter of the *Annunciation* probably didn’t sign his work because its depiction of a young Joseph was heretical, potentially dangerous. The artist was likely a man in holy orders of some kind, because he had obviously read Matthew’s annunciation story, our Gospel reading for today. It was discouraged for non-clerics to read the Bible in those days, and the Matthew narrative had fallen out of favor in the church. The party line was that it was all about God, Mary, and the Holy Spirit. Joseph was incidental at best. But that was not the artist’s understanding. And I believe he was right.

How much thought have you given to the person of Joseph in the Christmas story? Have you ever pondered why it is that Matthew begins his gospel with the story of Jesus’ birth from the perspective of a man whom one could argue was not really involved. Matthew’s telling is straight forward. “The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. . .” Mary was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit; Joseph, being a righteous man, decided to divorce her quietly. Joseph, had a dream telling him to believe Mary’s story: that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph woke up and took her as his wife. End of story. Matthew’s narrative lacks the poetry of Luke’s lengthy birth story, but its richness lies in its very sparseness, in what is left unsaid. Clearly, if one reads between the lines, when Mary first told Joseph about her condition, he didn’t believe her. But even thinking she had been unfaithful to him, he tried to keep faith with her by quietly putting her aside. That tells us a lot about the man he was. Then he had a dream.

“Do not be afraid to take her as your wife for this child is truly of the Holy Spirit.” That’s all. Just a dream. No proof. No sign. Nothing but a dream weighed against everything Joseph knew, everything he’d been told, every culture and factual norm of his young life.

How many men here would believe your beloved if she told you she was pregnant and an angel did it? I’m not going to ask for a show of hands, but you see the point. Mary said “yes” to God and, in due time, she had proof positive that she was not deluded, that she hadn’t imagined it all. Joseph also said “yes” to God; and he acted on that “yes” to God, but he never, ever was given to “know” that he was right. It was an act of pure faith: faith in God, faith in Mary. In the church, we sometimes use the language of “leaps of faith.” Joseph’s “yes” was a long jump across the Grand Canyon without a net; and when we read Matthew’s Gospel, we are to take note of that, to pay attention.

Now I know that for some of you, it’s hard to take the story seriously. You have factual doubts about this whole business of the virgin birth. Right? That’s OK. In the liberal church tradition, we don’t have a high doctrine of the Virgin Birth. It doesn’t matter if you believe in it as factual. But whatever the facts, whatever the biology of what happened in Judea 2000 years ago, the liberal Christian tradition still affirms that the gospel writers wrote their stories the way they did deliberately, to convey important theological truth about what this birth meant for God and for us. And if we want to understand that truth, we have to follow the story, pay attention to what is said, what is not said, and where it leads.

Joseph’s astounding leap of faith begins Matthew’s narrative for a reason. Right off the bat, the very first thing in his gospel, Matthew tells this story that quietly, almost matter of factly, without angel choirs or any other divine manifestations, holds up as our first model of faith a man who denies all of the wisdom of the world for the foolishness of God’s promises and who does this knowing that for the rest of his life, he will likely never have confirmation of whether he made the right or the wrong choice. “Welcome to the gospel of Jesus Christ,” Matthew is telling us. As it begins, so shall it continue, and so shall it end. Over and over again, if we keep reading the gospel story, if we try to live a Gospel life, we will be asked, like Joseph, to choose God’s foolishness over the wisdom of the world, and like all Christians through time, we are asked to do that knowing that we may never in our lifetimes see that choice validated in the ways the world validates. In other words, we choose for God. We love our neighbors, we turn the other cheek, we try to care more about the treasures of heaven than those of earth. We proclaim a crucified and risen Messiah, and that there is nothing in heaven or on earth stronger than the power of God’s love. We do all these things and still the way things are may not change significantly in our lifetimes. We choose for God, and then we simply live it out in hope and wonder.

Matthew’s birth story is a caution, a test if you will. The story of this adolescent man leaping over deep chasms of doubt should put us on alert. This is what we will be called to do. If we can’t enter into this story, then there’s no hope that we can follow to the end, to that other great story of passion, death, and resurrection.

Annunciation. At one level, the annunciation story in Matthew comes to Joseph, and he must choose God's foolishness over the wisdom of the world if he is to take his part in the story. But at a deeper level, Matthew's annunciation story is to us. This is the angel come to us, not in vision or in dream, but in sacred scripture. All you of this and all generations: if you would go on from here, if you would bear the Christ in your time and place like Joseph, then listen to God's foolish wisdom—the wisdom of love, of hope, of peace, of joy in all life. Listen to God's absurd plan: a baby in a manger, an itinerant rabbi, a discredited savior hung on a cross. If we would bear the Christ, we need to gather ourselves now and leap, believe that God's ways are wiser, better than the wisdom of this world. We need to believe and never look back. The choice, come first to Mary, then Joseph, is now before you. Will you also bear the Christ? Amen.