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Isaiah 7: 10 – 16
Romans 1: 1 – 7

Psalm 80: 1 – 7, 16 – 18
Matthew 1: 18 – 25

Joseph and Mary, up in a tree,
K-I-S-S-I-N-G.
First comes love, then comes marriage.
Then comes Jesus in the baby carriage.

Oops. That got a little messed up, didn't it? Joseph and Mary are supposed to get married first and THEN begin having children. That's the way it's *supposed* to be, right? Isn't it wonderful to know, though, that we have a God who is not restricted to the way things are "supposed to be?"

Joseph and Mary are not yet married, but they *are* betrothed, which means a lot more than our contemporary idea of "engagement." Most marriages in Jesus' time are arranged by the families and have little to do with 'falling in love.' To be betrothed means that the families of Joseph and Mary have entered into a legally binding contract, the only way out of which is divorce. If a couple is betrothed and the man dies, the woman is considered a widow. If there is infidelity on the woman's part, it is considered adultery (only applied to women) and there are two options. The woman can either be divorced – which means that she is considered damaged goods and her family is disgraced – or she can be stoned to death. How wonderful that we have a God for whom two choices is not enough! Which means that the first miracle in the New Testament is not something that Jesus does, or that Peter does, or Paul does. Rather, it is what our God does with two ordinary people – Joseph and Mary – in a most extraordinary and scandalous way. God enters into the messiness of human lives and allows grace to emerge.

Joseph is described as a righteous man (the word in Greek is δικαιοζυνη, which can also be translated as 'just'). There are not many people described as such in the Bible, though Noah, Abraham, Job and John the Baptizer are among them. In Scripture, the word is used primarily to describe someone's conduct in relationship to others, especially in the context of business and legal dealings and, of course, in one's relationship with God. For Matthew in particular, to be righteous – or just – is to live by the law, that is, God's revealed will. In scripture, righteousness is contrasted with wickedness, which is the conduct of those who are so totally self-focused that they neither honor God or respect their fellow human beings. A righteous person trusts in God.

So Joseph is among the righteous, which means that he trusts God. And because he is righteous, he is left in a quandary about Mary. In Jesus' time, girls as young as 12, and boys as young as 13 are allowed to marry. It's possible that Joseph and Mary are even cousins, because marriages often take place within extended families. It's also possible then, that Joseph and Mary have known each other for much of their lives. We don't know. But imagine these two, perhaps barely into adolescence, trying to deal with this mess. What might Joseph be thinking?

It's obvious that he is not the father of this child who is growing within Mary. It's also obvious that Joseph at least cares deeply for her, and perhaps even loves her. What can he possibly say to his parents? Or to Mary's family? He doesn't want to hurt her, or see her disgraced. How can he quietly send her away without adding to the messiness? The fact that Joseph the righteous one is even *considering* anything else besides the public humiliation of divorce or death by stoning means that

Joseph, the righteous one, is behaving contrary to one who is expected to follow the letter of the law. Joseph doesn't know what to do, so he decides to sleep on it. And God decides to take advantage of this.

As Joseph sleeps, he dreams, and into his dreams comes an angel of the Lord. The angel convinces him that it will not dishonor him or his family if he goes ahead and takes Mary for his wife, which will, of course, include raising the child as if it were his own. The angel also tells Joseph that the baby within Mary is a result of the Holy Spirit, and therefore is of God. Furthermore, this baby, this child, will be the long-awaited salvation of God for the people of God, hence the name that he is to be called, Jesus, or "God saves."

Matthew then has a curious comment to make in the role of narrator. "This is to fulfill what has been prophesied by the prophet, "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel." It's almost a direct quote from Isaiah 7:14, which we heard in our first reading today. Except...it isn't. There is no evidence that anyone writing before Matthew understands Mary and Jesus to be the fulfillment of this particular prophecy of Isaiah, but Matthew does.

The prophet Isaiah writes in the 8th century before Jesus is born. In the Hebrew, Isaiah uses the word '*almah*.' It simply means young woman, with no indication of her marital status or sexual purity. Isaiah is prophesying that God will deliver Judah from the threat of war with one of her enemies. Isaiah says that delivery will happen before the child of a young woman who is already pregnant reaches the age of moral discernment. This child will be given a symbolic name – Immanuel, God is with us. It's clear from the larger context that Isaiah's prophecy has nothing to do with a virgin conception or birth, or even about an event hundreds of years later. No one knows for sure what woman and child Isaiah is writing about. Some speculate that it is the King's wife and child, or perhaps Isaiah's himself.

About 400 years later, in the 4th century before Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures are translated into Greek (into what's known as the Septuagint) because the whole eastern Mediterranean is, by this time, dominated by Greek culture and language. When the Hebrew '*almah*' is translated into Greek, the scribes choose the word *παρτηενοζ* in Greek, which frequently means 'virgin,' but can also simply mean 'young woman,' like *almah*.

Matthew, the evangelist doesn't mind this at all because he understands Jesus to be the fulfillment of all of Hebrew scripture. He doesn't ask us to take this story on its own, as fantastical as it might seem to some, but rather in the larger context of the story of God and Israel. Matthew is writing for a predominately Jewish audience, and so for him, it is important to tie back in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus with Hebrew scripture. It gets a little messier in terms of some grammatical changes that Matthew makes, but Matthew's overall meaning or point is probably something close to, "God will constitute (the child) him as the one who represents the continuing divine presence among the people of Israel.

Then Matthew turns back to our protagonist, Joseph. Joseph has had this dream filled with the presence of an angel of the Lord and now he wakes up. It's as if God is saying to Joseph, "Trust me on this one," and Joseph the righteous one does, so he acts upon it and takes Mary for his wife. Perhaps Joseph is a little intimidated by the prospect of this being God's son, so he goes above and beyond what the angel has commanded. Joseph and Mary, though now married, choose not to consummate the marriage until after the birth of Jesus.

God's grace has emerged out of this mess, allowing Joseph to do the right thing, a very brave and demanding thing, a very trusting thing. Joseph believes Mary, believes the angel and becomes Jesus' father on earth. God has stepped very powerfully right into the fragile lives of this young couple and allowed each of them to be faithful to God in their individual callings. When confronted with the challenge of choosing between the Law and being accepted by God, Joseph (and Mary) choose God. It's not surprising then that the boy-child they will raise together will do the same thing throughout his life.

"...until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus." In the last verse of today's passage, Jesus is quietly born and named. We do not have Luke's details of a stable with lowing cows, or of the meeting with Simeon and Anna in the Temple when Jesus is presented for naming. Matthew addresses none of that. But in saying that Joseph 'named him Jesus,' Matthew is saying a couple of things. The name Jesus (Joshua or Jeshua in Hebrew), does indeed mean "God saves." Jesus is a very popular name in Israel at the time of Jesus, rather like Michael or Jason are now. Jesus, or Joshua, is of course the same name as the Joshua who takes over the leadership of the Israelites with Moses' death. It is Joshua who will deliver the wandering Israelites into the promised land. It is Jesus who will deliver the people of God into salvation, the Kingdom of God. Jesus will rescue the people of God, not from slavery in Egypt but from slavery to sin, and, as N. T. Wright puts it, "not just from exile in Babylon, but out of exile from their own hearts and lives."

It's interesting to note that at the same time, Immanuel, the name which Isaiah prophesies, is *not* a popular name. Perhaps it is because "God with us" might be more than parents want to claim about their child. Wright points out that "God with us" are the bookends which encompass all of Matthew's gospel. Here, at the beginning, Matthew uses Isaiah's Immanuel, God-with-us, to proclaim this holy birth. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus will promise to be with his followers until the end of the age. The two names together, Jesus and Immanuel, are indicative of the meaning of the whole story.

Bidden or unbidden, God is always present, and sometimes in some pretty spectacular or unexpected ways. God comes into our messy human lives and world working in and through us if we, like Joseph and Mary, are willing. God comes into our messiness, our things that are not "the way things are supposed to be." And God's grace, unlimited by the finitude of human possibilities, acts in new and startling ways to bring about the fulfillment of God's promises. It's nearly Christmas. Jesus is coming. How do we not let the distractions of the holidays make us miss the coming of Christ? How do we learn to be as trusting as Joseph and to act upon that trust? How do we open our messy and imperfect lives to the grace of God? How do we give birth to the Christ in our own day and time for the sake of this world?

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