

“ . . . an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream . . . [and Joseph] did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.” (Mt 1.20, 24)

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, we gain rare and precious insight into the character of Joseph. Matthew tells us he was a “righteous man,” that is, a keeper of the law. He also lets us see Joseph as a compassionate man. Culturally, Joseph would have been expected to put his fiancée’ Mary out of his life after discovering she was pregnant, but not by him. But “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream” and explained that Mary’s pregnancy would fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy, that a “virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God is with us.’” (Mt 1.20-23) So Joseph “d[oes] as the angel of the Lord command[s] him”: he marries Mary. Think of the courage that took! Joseph, faithful and humble, trusts God’s message—and God’s messenger—completely. He trusts the angel’s astounding declaration and command so thoroughly that he is willing to cut against the grain of cultural expectation and religious law; to embrace, indeed to wed, one he would have been expected to thrust aside as unworthy.

Joseph appears three more times in Matthew’s Gospel. Twice more he is visited “in his sleep” by an “angel of the Lord”: first, to warn him to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt before Herod’s “slaughter of the innocents”; and second, to tell him to take his family back “to Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” (Mt 2.13-20). Here again, Joseph trusts God’s message as he has received it. He trusts so completely that he is willing to risk the lives of his son, of Mary and himself, by obeying. What a gift Joseph gives us! He shows us the power that lies in being willing to hear the voice of God even when the message is unlikely or difficult. Then he demonstrates the courage to act on the discerned will of God, even if it flies in

the face of good sense. As the rest of the story of our faith shows, in that combination of faithful discernment and courageous action lies saving power.

The final time Joseph appears in Matthew's Gospel, he appears only by reference. Jesus, by now well into his adult ministry has been teaching in the synagogue in his hometown. The people are "astounded," and say "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is this not the carpenter's son?" (Mt 13.54ff) Joseph's first appearance in Matthew's Gospel (1.16) serves to establish Jesus royal lineage as "the son of David, the son of Abraham." His last mention serves to remind us of Jesus' humble station in earthly life. He is, after all, only a carpenter's son.

So Joseph figures prominently in establishing who Jesus is and where he came from. But as the early church elaborated the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, Joseph was necessarily relegated to the role of "stepfather of our Lord." He does not appear as Jesus' earthly ministry culminates in his suffering, crucifixion and resurrection. But Joseph, as presented by Matthew, has at least one profoundly important thing to teach us. Three times in Matthew's account "an angel of the Lord" appears to Joseph "in a dream" and gives him a command. Each time he obeys; and because of those acts of faithful obedience, Jesus ministry on earth has a safe and honorable beginning. Swiss theologian Emil Brunner said (Der Mittler) that "Faith is obedience, nothing else; literally nothing else at all." In our postmodern way, we sometimes value other aspects of religious experience more than we do faith. We like to question, and debate, and be inclusive, and honor doubt. All these are good things. But in the end, following a God we cannot see in a world where God's presence is often obscured comes down to this one thing: faith. And faith, as Brunner so aptly stated, "is obedience ... literally nothing else at all." Surely, Joseph remains a powerful icon of that obedience which is, faith.

In many ways, we live worlds away from Joseph. Our concepts of communication with God, of God Godself, are very different from those of Joseph's time. We are suspicious, aren't we, of people who say "an angel came to me in a dream, and said to" ... whatever? Between Joseph's concept of God, and ours, lie astonishing developments: the culmination of Jesus' ministry; centuries of Church history, some parts of it more honorable than others; the Renaissance; the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century; the Industrial Revolution; humankind's first walk on the moon; the globalization of economies; our development of the capability to destroy our race and planet.

Our very modes of transmitting information have changed profoundly. Matthew's Gospel, for example, is a carefully chosen and edited collection of Christian teachings. Transmitted orally for decades after Jesus resurrection, these were pulled together by an anonymous teacher late in the first century. For centuries, this book was laboriously reproduced by hand-copying manuscripts, passed from teacher to teacher in the Christian community, being edited and interpreted over centuries to come. In the process of producing a copy of Matthew's writings, one would come to know them intimately—for the copying was done by hand.

Then came Gutenberg and his printing press. Now it was possible to produce numerous copies of information, and the problem became one of distribution. For example: this past Friday marked the feast of St Peter Canisius. Canisius, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Jesuit priest, was a well-known and respected academic. But his popular claim to fame was this: in the mid-1500's, at the Council of Trent, the hierarchy of the Roman Church formulated its theological and policy responses to the Protestant Reformation. The printed decrees of the Council ran to 250 pages a copy. Understandably, the Pope wanted to get the decrees of the Council distributed to all the European bishops. Problem was, the first envoy dispatched was unable to negotiate the web of

Protestants and clusters of thieves which covered Europe. The precious documents were lost. So more copies were printed, and resourceful, determined St Peter Canisius was sent forth. Not only did he get the Tridentine decrees delivered, but he managed to tote along three bags of other books for his own academic use!

Now, welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 12/23/2001 edition of The Living Church we read:

“A **pontifical document** has been *issued electronically* [emphasis mine] for the first time in history, according to the Vatican. In a ceremony at the Apostolic Palace on Nov.22, Pope John Paul II signed a message summing up the work of a meeting of the bishops of Oceania held at the Vatican in 1998. For several years the Vatican has posted documents on its website ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)), but only after distributing them in print first.”

Now, even in that most conservative of Western organizations, information can be produced in massive quantities, and delivered instantaneously to virtually unlimited numbers of destinations. We no longer hunger for information; we are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of it. Our problem is not obtaining data, or even sorting through data, but determining which data even merit sorting.

So after all these astounding technological changes, we are left with the same problem Joseph had: discerning the voice of God in the cacophonous din of the surrounding culture. “An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.” How is God communicating to us in this place and time? Are we even listening? If so, how do we tell God’s voice from the many other voices which urge themselves upon us? Do we understand what Joseph understood, and Emil Brunner understood, that “faith is obedience, nothing else”? If so, we realize the importance of listening for God in the midst of the cultural din: for if we cannot hear God’s voice clearly, we cannot obey it faithfully. And that is a huge spiritual problem, for the obedience that is faith

constitutes our right relationship with God. And after all these centuries, all these amazing technological achievements, the Word of God is still spread exactly as it was in Joseph's time and life: it is *demonstrated* in lives of attentiveness, of courage, of faith, of obedience.

Happily, we still have the ancient, tested and true core images of our faith to guide us. Today, as we wait to celebrate God's continual arrival among us, Matthew helps us rejoice in a wonderful icon of the faithful life: Joseph, a humble and faithful man who discerned God's voice, followed God's directions, and helped to usher new life into a hurting world. Let us, like Joseph, cultivate the ability to hear God's voice. Let us develop the faith to obey God's urgings, even when they seem risky or irrational. With discerning, courageous, obedient Joseph as our model, let us resolve to extend compassion to those society would have us condemn. Let us do these things, literally, for God's sake: in faithful obedience may we help to usher the Word of God into a world hungry for Jesus' extravagant message of hope!

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