

Father to Father: A Letter to Joseph
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UU Church of Minnetonka
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READING

Matthew 1:18-25

These are the facts concerning the birth of Jesus Christ: His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph, her fiancé, being a man of stern principle, decided to break the engagement but to do it quietly, as he didn't want to publicly disgrace her.

As he lay awake considering this, he fell into a dream, and saw an angel standing beside him. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "don't hesitate to take Mary as your wife! For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a Son, and you shall name him Jesus (meaning 'Savior'), for he will save his people from their sins. This will fulfill god's message through his prophets:

*'Listen! The virgin shall conceive a child!
She shall give birth to a Son,
and he shall be called "Emmanuel"
(meaning "God is with us").'* "

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel commanded, and brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her Son was born; and Joseph named him "Jesus."

SERMON

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Dear Joseph,

As the father of Jesus, you are known through a variety of traditions by many names: Joseph of the House of David, Joseph the Betrothed, Joseph the Worker, Saint Joseph, San Jose. Unless you tell me otherwise, I'll assume it is OK for me to address you as just "Joseph."

It is a tradition of mine in my church to write a letter each year during this holiday season to someone who is associated with this holiday season. Two years ago I wrote to Jacob Marley from the story, "A Christmas Carol," and last year I wrote to George Bailey from the story, "It's a Wonderful Life." Someday I hope to write a letter to your son, but so far I have not found the courage to do that. I'm not even sure what I'd say.

But for several reasons, this year I wanted to write to you. This is the season when people typically celebrate the birth of your son, but this year I find myself thinking about you and wondering what you must be feeling as you look ahead to your own imminent fatherhood. You see, I have a baby girl who was born last spring, and I also have a three-year-old son. As a fairly new father myself, I felt compelled to write to you because of our similar place in life.

Also, even though it never says in the Christian Scriptures how old you are, tradition always shows you as an older man – and since I was 40 when my son was born, and just turned 43 when my daughter was born, I feel I qualify as an "older man" myself when it comes to being a new parent!

From what little I've come to know and learn from experience during these past three years is that parenting is quite challenging, but most of the time it is the most engaging and rewarding challenge I've ever encountered in my life. My oldest boy is a delight, and I feel a deeper privilege in having him as my son than maybe he will ever know. After all my wanderings and all the bumpy roads and roadblocks I've gone through, I never imagined I would have the amazing good fortune to have such an awesome woman as his mother for my wife, or that I would ever have a child as beautiful and full of fun as he is. And my eight-month old daughter? Well she is full of joy and curiosity, too, and seems to be more cuddly than my son. She loves to touch her forehead to mine, or to press her cheek against mine, and to just leave it there, feeling the warmth of my touch.

But just so you don't think this joy and happiness is all there is to parenting, I need to let you know that these...*urchins*...of mine are also quite capable of being pains in the neck! Crying, whining, flopping on the floor in protest, tantrums, the striving for some form of power and control with the all powerful "no," and subsequent refusal to move from the spot.

Rumor has it, though, that your child will not have any of these behavior issues. At least the way it comes down to us these many years later, Jesus seems to be a fairly gentle man, and we really only see him lose his temper once when he chases the moneychangers out of the Temple.

Oh wait. I should probably check in with you first. Have you even decided yet what you will name your child? I know an angel came to you in a dream right around the time you found out Mary was pregnant and told you to get married to Mary anyway, even though you aren't the father. I also heard the rumor that the angel told you are going to have a son, and that you are supposed to name him Jesus. Since you didn't have ultrasound back then, is that typically the way people found out about their babies – through a visit from an angel?

Forgive my ignorance, but that just seems so weird to me. So foreign. You see, I've never been visited by an angel. Well, maybe I have, but if so, they never told me they were an angel. But meeting an angel at least seems pretty cool. The most difficult part about what you went through, though, is that – at least from what I read in the story that comes down to us – you never had a say in anything having to do with the birth of your son. You had four separate dreams, with appearances from an angel of the Lord in at least three of them, telling you what you were supposed to feel or do. As far as I can tell, you never had the chance to express your opinion, or to have your voice heard. In fact, none of the stories about you ever tell us anything you were thinking or quoted anything you said. The only thing there is how angels appeared, told you what to do, and you did it.

All my life I figured you cared about Mary, and I assumed you just did with grace and understanding everything the angels told you to do: you were going to break up with Mary, but the angel told you to stay with her, so you did; you were probably going to name your kid Elishiva if she was a girl, or Avimilech if he was a boy, or something like that...but the angel told you it was going to be a boy, and told you to name him Jesus, so you did; later, because of some danger in the area, an angel told you to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, so you did. A while later an angel told you it was safe to bring everybody back to Judea. So you did that too. Now that I have my own children, and I know how much I want to be involved in their lives, I wonder much more whether it is true that you just did everything the angels told you to do with grace and obedience.

I think I understand the different social norms of your time, so I think I understand why you wanted to break up with Mary when you found out she was pregnant before you got married,

and before you had the chance to sleep together. Even by the social norms of today I think it would be difficult for a man to stay with a girlfriend after learning she had gotten pregnant from someone else. But in your case, this “someone else” is supposed to be God. I mean, how intimidating is that?

I think most parents, and certainly many men I know, feel intimidated and inadequate about becoming a father in the first place, even under normal circumstances. I can’t even imagine what it would be like to have God get my girlfriend pregnant, and then tell me I had to marry my girlfriend anyway, and then on top of it all, tell me that *I* had to be the one to raise the kid. I know a little about being under the pressure of family expectations – but what you have to endure is ridiculous.

I don’t know what kind of deal you may have worked out with God, or if you did, but I’m sorry to tell you that throughout time Mary gets all the glory and recognition. You are mostly just a footnote, a straw man set in place so the story about Mary and your son can be told. They put you in there to prove the lineage of Jesus from Abraham through King David and through you. But then, according to the story, you end up not even being biologically related to Jesus at all. After all that God told you to do, that doesn’t seem to me like much of a reward.

For someone striving to do the right thing – certainly by the social codes of your time – and breaking up quietly, without embarrassing Mary, it really seems like you got left out of a big part of the life of your family.

But then again, I’m not you. I don’t really know what’s going on in your head. I don’t really know what you’re feeling. I know my more conservative friends would say you are a man of faith, and that you did what God asked you to do, not only with grateful obedience, but also with great joy. It is difficult for me to believe you did all this with great joy, but maybe you did what you had to do because it just had to be done. Sometimes, I know, life is like that. We can complain, or we can wish things were different, or we can get angry at the universe, or get angry at God...but sometimes we just have to do things because there is no other choice.

I remember visiting my own father in the hospital when I was in eleventh grade, and the doctor came in to tell our family that my dad had a terminal illness. I remember that day so clearly. I remember the doctor telling us my dad probably had somewhere between five and ten years to live. There wasn’t much I could do about that. I’m not strong enough to change things like that. In many ways, I don’t think I handled myself very well. Rather than engage life and all its beauty, I withdrew from people and I had a very hard time committing to anything – to work, to relationships, to my future, to life. There is much about my story during that time that I would rather not tell.

Now that I think about it, maybe it is better that we don’t know more of the details of your life, either. The way it is written, and certainly the way so many people read about you now, you come across as a very saintly man, a supportive husband and an adoring and loving father. Maybe it is better that way.

But still, you must be thinking and feeling a whole range of things. From your visions of angels, from the visit and three gifts from the priests of Zoroaster, from the reaction of Simeon at the Temple when you go there for the circumcision of Jesus – you can probably tell that your son is going to be someone special. The angel even said that the name of Jesus means “savior” and “God with us.” Even if you didn’t get a choice in the matter, I imagine you must feel a little pleased that of all the men on the earth, God chose you to be the stepfather of this particular boy. That’s gotta feel special, and make you feel at least a little bit proud.

Well, if the stories are true, your stepson Jesus turns out to be quite a leader. My take on it is that he never intended to be a leader, he just taught the truths he knew from his own experience of enlightenment. But people apparently liked what he had to say and began to follow him. Believe it or not, your stepson founded what became a new world religion, and that religion is still around 2,000 years later! Around the world, those who now claim to be the followers of his teachings number over two billion people. I wonder if all those hours in your carpentry shop taught him patience, and the beauty of a craft, and the ability to have a vision no one else could see for a project from start to finish. Well, whatever it was, you must have done something right.

I often wonder what my own children will be like when they grow up. I wonder if I am doing a good job, or even a decent job, of being a father. I wonder if the things I say and do will have a positive effect on them. I wonder what they are going to do with their lives. I wonder if some disease or accident will cut their lives short while they are still children, and I wonder the alternative, whether they will help to change the world as they live into old age.

You have a difficult life ahead of you. Even more difficult is the life of your stepson. I know something about his life. I know he does not take an easy path. I know he does not remain a carpenter and take over your business when you get old. Your stepson consorts with sick people, poor people, prostitutes, and Roman tax collectors. One of his best friends and closest followers is a terrorist. But the way he lives his life is one of his most disturbing teachings of all. At the heart of everything, he teaches a radical love full of compassion and forgiveness that we struggle to comprehend even today, whether or not we call ourselves his followers.

I also know that when a person speaks and lives his kind of truth, people in power do not appreciate it, even if they can't understand it. I imagine you are not a stupid man. You've seen what the Roman soldiers do to people who upset the status quo or challenge their authority. If you want to know the details, I will tell you. But for now, in this season, I urge us to ponder in our hearts not the endings, but the beginnings, the lives before us – our lives, and the lives of our children.

One of the most difficult lessons I am continually learning as a father is where the limits are of my own influence on my son. It is an ongoing process, and it changes every day. Some days my son will be a very good listener and do what I ask him to do. Some days he will refuse almost everything I say and throw tantrums. I know a piece of wisdom that has been very useful in helping to guide me through these times, and maybe it will be helpful to you, too. It is a poem from a man who lived about a hundred years before my time. He wrote:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams...
You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.

It is impossible to know what our children will become. Sometimes we may get divine messages that provide us with glimpses of our children's future, and sometimes we are just not in control of the hold life has on our children. And yet, we can still support them with our love, sending them forth as living arrows from our well-constructed bows.

Another poet, a woman by the name of Sophia Lyon Fahs who was a religious educator in my faith tradition, once wrote a poem called "The Gift." In that poem she wrote that, "each night a child is born is a holy night." She writes:

fathers and mothers sitting by their baby's crib
feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.

They ask: When or how will this new life end? Or will it ever end?
Each night a child is born is a holy night:
A time for singing,
A time for wondering,
A time for worshipping.

Joseph, this *is* a time for worshipping. The birth of your stepson reminds me of the joy and holiness in the birth of every child – even the holy nights when the children of our parents were born. We don't look at it that way very often. But I believe that the love and peace your stepson teaches will come to live in our hearts, and that we will more deeply understand the reason his birth is celebrated, when we allow our children to inspire us, and we see that each one of us has a spark of the divine within us because each one of us was born on a holy night.

I wish you well on your journey of parenting.

My deepest admiration and love,
Kent Hemmen Saleska