

Advent Reflection Guide

Not Your Average Joe



MONDAY 12.5.22 ~Matthew 1:18-19, Psalm 18:28-30, Isaiah 43:1-4

As Matthew told it, the story of Jesus' birth began with Joseph engaged to Mary. He learned she was pregnant and knew he had not done anything to father a child. (It seems he lived in Bethlehem and she in Nazareth, so their families may have arranged the engagement.) No divine messenger had visited Joseph to tell him what was happening. As a devout man, feeling pain and disappointment as his dreams fell apart, he likely sought comfort in Scriptures like today's.

- Isaiah 43 came in a section of the book many mainline scholars call "Second Isaiah." It spoke first to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. It emphasized God's personal bond with God's people—"...I will be with you...I love you..." (Isaiah 43:2-4) It did not promise an easy, pain-free life but pledged that whatever happened, God's presence was dependable. How could such a passage speak to Joseph's hurting heart? How does it speak to you today?
- Have you ever faced a situation that, even if not as severe as Joseph's, involved some of the same feelings? A time when someone you trusted let you down, and you had to face pain, disappointment, perhaps anger, perhaps tears, certainly shock? How can passages like Psalm 18 and Isaiah 43 give you a spiritual foundation from which to move ahead in putting your life back together at times like that?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, from the start of the story, your miraculous conception pointed to the fact that your life would upend business as usual in our broken world. Fill me with the courage to let you reshape all the parts of my life that need it. Amen.

TUESDAY 12.6.22~Matthew 1:18-20, Deuteronomy 22:20-24

In Israelite culture, a betrothal was as binding as marriage. When Mary, betrothed to Joseph, became pregnant, it led Joseph at first to the "obvious" belief that she had been intimate with some other man. Personally painful as that was, Joseph quickly began to realize that the situation might cost Mary's life. If he denounced her publicly, she might be stoned to death (see John 8:3-5), as the law in Deuteronomy said. He sought a different solution, even though it might let some people blame him for her pregnancy.

- Matthew, with just a few words, reported something important even before Joseph had his dream about the angel: "Joseph her husband was a righteous man...he didn't want to humiliate her..." (Matthew 1:19) What do you learn about Joseph's inner qualities from his measured response ("he decided to call off their engagement quietly")? Do you work to avoid humiliating others?
- *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* said Joseph was "a devout Jewish man willing to give up what was often perceived to be a Jewish father's greatest privilege—siring his first-born son—in order to obey God's will."¹ Have you had to give up some cherished dream to obey God, or might you have to? If so, how are you moving forward with a healthy perspective?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your earthly father showed his righteous character, not in demanding that people follow the law to the letter but in showing mercy to Mary. Help my righteousness, too, to always lean in the direction of mercy. Amen.

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WEDNESDAY 12.7.22~Matthew 1:1-17

The way Matthew started Jesus' story feels strange--even boring to most of us. Family records were a key source of identity in Jesus' day. King Herod, the Great, despised by most Jews because he was half Edomite, actually destroyed official registers so that no one else could prove a purer ancestry than his own! In verse 1, Matthew said three significant things about Jesus: he called him "Christ," the "son of David," and the "son of Abraham."

- The Greek word "Christ," like the Hebrew word "Messiah," meant "anointed one." It was commonly used to identify the deliverer God had promised to send. What do you believe made Jesus' link to Abraham and King David so key for Matthew? In what ways does it matter to you that, in Jesus, God kept the ancient promises made to those men?
- In an unusual move for his time, Matthew named five women (including Mary) in Jesus' genealogy. The other four (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and "the wife of Uriah"—i.e., Bathsheba) had all, like Mary, faced obstacles, even scandal, in their lives. Yet God had worked through each of them to advance the story of God's redeeming mission in the world. Does God still work through unlikely people? In what ways is God at work through you?

Prayer: O God, you have always been willing to work with anyone who is willing to work with you, no matter what their past contains. I want to be a part of your great redeeming purpose in the world. Please work through me. Amen.

THURSDAY 12.8.22~Genesis 39:2-10, 41:39-43

Jesus' earthly father Joseph was named for a great man in Israel's history. The first Joseph was the patriarch Jacob's favorite son (born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel). Genesis devoted chapters 37-50 to his story. Known for his integrity and reliability, he eventually reached a position from which he saved Egypt (and Jacob's family) from a great famine.

- In Bible times, as often happens today, parents would choose names that captured the character they hoped and prayed their child would develop. What traits from his great namesake in the Hebrew past could a humble working man like Joseph emulate and live in to?
- Do you bear a name associated with any admirable person, either in your own family or from history? If so, what qualities does that name suggest to you? What qualities is God working into your character through the challenges and opportunities you face in life? In what ways do you want your "name" (whether it is famous or obscure) to be remembered?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, my parents got to choose what I was named at birth. But I get to choose what kind of person that name identifies. Help me to be a person noted for the kind of character you offer to all people. Amen.

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FRIDAY 12.9.22~Luke 11:11-13, Mark 14:36

We gain a sense of how Joseph went about being a father figure to young Jesus by looking at how Jesus spoke about fathers in his teaching. The failure of too many human fathers and increasing awareness of the sexism built into many Western cultures leads us to be cautious in using words like “father” to identify God. But Jesus’ parable after teaching the Lord’s Prayer showed fathers as giving. When Jesus prayed, he used the term “Abba” (Aramaic for “Dad”).

- Jesus’ words in Luke 11 suggested that it was unthinkable that a father would respond to a child’s needs with anything other than an effort to give the best possible gifts. Was that true about your father or other father figures in your life? If so, how has that shaped the ways you relate to others? If not, how have other people (and God) helped to fill in the gaps left by your father?
- The apostle Paul adopted the prayer practice that Mark reported of Jesus, encouraging believers to cry out to our heavenly “Abba” in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. What are your prayers like? Are you able to speak with God comfortably and trustingly as you would to an infinitely wise and caring father, or do your prayers tend to be more stiff, formal and limited to “safe” subjects? How can you become more at home with your heavenly *Abba*?

Prayer: O God, sometimes in church we say, “God is good—all the time, All the time—God is good.” Help my relationship with you to keep growing, so that my trust in you is not just church talk, but a living reality. Amen.

SATURDAY 12.10.22~Matthew 1:20-21, Acts 5:27-32

We come back to Joseph--engaged to Mary, doubting her story that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and planning to break the engagement quietly. But in a dream, an angel told him to believe Mary and to proceed with the marriage plans. Joseph found himself in a story much bigger than just one wedding. The angel said to name the child “Jesus” (the Greek form of the Hebrew “Joshua,” which meant “Yahweh is salvation”). Many Hebrews wanted salvation from the occupying Roman army. But the angel didn’t talk about the Romans. This child, the angel said, would save people from humanity’s greatest enemy: sin. The angel’s announcement became central to how Christians from the earliest days expressed their faith.

- Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the law of Moses pointed to but could not of itself produce. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the ‘exile’ they have suffered not just in Babylon but in their own hearts and lives.”² In what ways has missing God’s path led your heart and life into a kind of “exile”?
- What are the benefits of letting Jesus save you from that exile? How confident are you that Jesus can, in fact, save you from any life missteps and that he is the savior from sin that we all need?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, though I sometimes forget it, I need a savior. Thank you for coming to be that savior. Redeem my inner and outer way of life from sin, so I may walk daily in your light. Amen.

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What did I learn? _____



How might it apply in my life? _____



What is a next step I can take? _____
