

Good people and new names (Matthew 1:18–25)

Every child is from God. Joseph gets an explicit divine promise.

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Early in my current call I arranged to meet with people from my church, in ones and twos and whole families. There was no set agenda--just come and talk to the new pastor.

I heard a lot of what you might expect. People had old stories to tell, axes to grind. Others had visions grand and bold, or stories that made me laugh or weep. But no one surprised me as much as a family I'll call the Halversons.

I already knew them on sight. The kind of dedicated church couple that everybody likes. Church members who volunteer for committees and visit the sick and sing in the choir. But they didn't want to defend traditional hymns or vent about petty squabbles. They wanted to tell me about their son named Susan.

This was some years ago, when accessible bathrooms and preferred pronouns were not yet a part of the common parlance, when the word transgender was barely used. This was when expectations dictated that a person's gender stay the same, their name not change.

The Gospel reading appointed for the day upends expectation and ends with a new name. A regular guy finds himself thrust into an unanticipated future. The question hangs in the balance: will love endure such a challenge?

We don't know much about Joseph. This vignette, uniquely, does give some small glimpse into his character. Joseph is a just man, yet is unwilling to punish Mary for her supposed transgression. Joseph is a good man, opting instead to take care of things quietly. But he is also resolved to divorce. It takes an angel to change his mind.

One can only wonder what Joseph is thinking on hearing of his fiancée's pregnancy. While fantastical extra-biblical narratives exist regarding Mary's betrothal, in all likelihood the marriage was arranged. Western vision paints arranged marriage as less than ideal, but the system worked. Love could blossom over time, even if it wasn't present from the start. But could love blossom for a child conceived "before they came together"? A child presumably different from Joseph? A child he might not be able to love?

In the 2012 book *Far From the Tree*, Andrew Solomon recounts his loving parents' struggle to understand his own difference. He interviews other parents from families with children who are deaf, schizophrenic, prodigies; who were conceived in rape; who commit crimes; who have Downs Syndrome or dwarfism or autism; who are transgender. His work is no sugarcoated fantasy. Some families are broken by the experience. But others adapt to their children's needs, as Solomon writes, "grateful for experiences they would have done anything to avoid."

It would help these parents--all of us, really--to have an angel's explanation at the start. To reassure us that though a child might not be like us, or what we expected, they are from God. Every child is from God, but only Joseph receives this explicit divine promise, along with the angel's other guarantee: that the child will save us. This surely helps Joseph accept Mary's child into his life. But maybe that reassurance is not the point of the story.

While the child will be born to Mary and Joseph, while he will be born to us, this won't be an easy integration. It doesn't surprise me that the angel doesn't tell Joseph more. If Simeon's prophecy came before the baby, if Joseph knew the challenges of Jesus' ministry, if he knew of the trial and shame and crucifixion--maybe Joseph would have said no.

Maybe we would, too. In my tradition we baptize people at the very start of their faith journey, most often as infants. I sometimes think that the adults adopted into the family of faith aren't so different. They, like infants, can't possibly comprehend

all that will be asked of them--a love that encompasses the heart and soul and mind. They can only grow into it.

The couple across the desk from me had always loved their child. But they would be the first to admit that it wasn't easy to accept her difference. In an time when experts disagreed, when pastors condemned, when friends were unlikely to understand, it wasn't clear what to do. "Pastor," the wife told me, "we're not sure where we are right now, but we know where we are going to end up." They were with Susan, come what may. Implied in their confession was their challenge: would I stand with them in this, too?

Really this was the same question everyone asked in those early weeks during office hours. Would I stand with them as they navigated the challenge and changes of a world that doesn't always work out entirely as we hope for, entirely as we expect? Would I help them find the joy and even gratitude in the midst of the struggle?

The truthful answer: sometimes better than others. But I'm not called to save the world. Jesus is. That's what the angel says. We wait for this revelation through Advent; we wonder at it come Christmas. This child is, through the mystery of the incarnation, God become fully human. In the end, it's not about Joseph's acceptance of Jesus, or our acceptance of the Christ child. It is God who adapts, who changes, who meets us in the Christ. It is God who loves us just as we are.

We may be just and good people--the kind who volunteer for the committees, sing in the choir, and visit the sick. Or not. We may know the right thing to do; we may fail miserably, even wantonly. Yet God chooses to come to us before we can choose to come to God. The angels say we do not need to be afraid. Come as you are, come what may, Jesus will be with us, as Matthew concludes his Gospel, "even to the end of the age."