

4 Advent A

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Joseph's Fear

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There is something missing from Pixar Animation's first feature length computer animated film *Toy Story*, which was released in November 1995. While it seems to have everything you would expect in an Academy Award nominated and technologically innovative movie: a top notch voice cast including well-known actors Tom Hanks and Tim Allen, lovable and relatable characters who are mostly toys that come to life when their owners aren't around, a great plot, all the tension, humor, and character development that goes with any buddy comedy adventure genre, and a fabulous sound track, fans of the movie have been bothered for these 21 years by something that is conspicuously absent.

What the movie *Toy Story* is missing is a father. The toys who are the main characters in the movie belong to a boy named Andy and through their eyes the audience gets to meet Andy's family: 8-year-old Andy, his baby sister Molly, who is literally a baby, and their mother. Nowhere in the *Toy Story* movie or its sequels does Andy's father ever appear or even get mentioned.

This absence of Andy's father has concerned some fans of the movie, so much so that a few of them have come up with theoretical explanations of where Andy's father could be. One theory is Andy's father is in the military stationed overseas. However, this theory has holes because there are no pictures of Andy's father in the house and no mention of him. Besides, fans point out, Andy's mother is not wearing a wedding ring.

Which leads to the other popular theory that Andy's parents have gotten divorced, which is why no one mentions him, and explains why Andy, his mother and baby sister move to a new house in the movie. This theory got a lot of attention from fans who were quick to judge Andy's dad as a "deadbeat" who walked out on his family, there was a lot of anger thrown at a character who it turned out in reality, never existed.

Several years ago, the truth came out about Andy's father. In an interview, the story writer of the movie admitted they intentionally didn't give Andy a father and never gave any thought to creating a back story for why his father wasn't in the picture. In another interview the creative team behind *Toy Story* gave, the reason they said why Andy didn't have a father had to do with budgetary constraints, as one way to keep the movie from going too far over budget was to limit the number of characters.

When my husband heard about this, he was offended that it seemed so easy to exclude a father but not a mother. And while we need to remember *Toy Story* is a movie about toys, not families, there was something that some fans of the movie couldn't let go of and wanted to resolve about Andy's absent father, perhaps more for their own sakes than for that of a cartoon character. In a time when we hear more and more about how many men are feeling threatened about their roles in society, causing the rise of groups like the alt-right, there is reason to pay attention to concern around an absent father in a children's movie.

Which is why I believe it is important that today we heard about a man struggling with his role in Jesus' birth in our Gospel. I'm sure most of us are familiar with the presence of Joseph in the Christmas story, but most of the time he is little more than a quiet figure in our nativity or crèche scenes. While the Gospel of Luke talks a great deal about Mary, and includes a fair amount of detail about her willingness to carry, give birth to and raise God's Son, only Matthew gives us the perspective of the man who was not the "real" father but accepted the sometimes challenging and difficult task of raising and loving a child you know is not your own. There is something uncomfortable about Joseph we might not want to think too much about, especially as we get closer to Christmas, a time we are repeatedly told is about the comfort of families. So for most of us, most of the time, we really don't give Joseph much thought.

Scholars have though. Many scholars tell us the reason why Matthew's Gospel is the only Gospel to include Joseph's perspective is because he is an essential device of the author to help point the audience directly back to the Old Testament. The author of Matthew intends for those of us reading this Gospel to see Jesus as the New Moses who liberated people from the slavery of sin, just as Moses in the Book Exodus liberated God's People from slavery under pharaoh. So, with that understanding, Joseph is important because of his dreams, just like Joseph from the Old Testament. I'm sure you remember that young and favorite son of Jacob and his beautiful coat who had amazing dreams and the God-given ability to interpret his dreams and those of others. It was that Joseph that eventually drew his family to Egypt where they escaped the calamity of famine, and it is the Joseph we heard about today who will have a dream after Jesus is born telling him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt where Jesus will escape a massacre of children commanded by Herod to remind us of how Moses was also saved from a similar massacre commanded by Pharaoh. You see how it all connects?

This theory sounds like it could be, and I am sure it is probably true, as scholars are certainly more intelligent than I am. However, the cynical person in me has a problem with this theory, because it sounds to me like an attempt to distract or distance us from something uncomfortable and I wonder if there might be more to this story in Matthew. Using Joseph as a device like that feels to me like a sanitizing attempt to ignore the darker, messier, complex and very real elements of this Gospel.

The parts that are about Joseph, his dilemma, his fear, and his humanity. Today's Gospel starts by telling us Joseph was engaged to Mary, but they were not living together. I'm sure you have heard many sermons or read commentaries that say they were very nearly married, and could be considered married except the marriage had yet to be consummated. Fidelity was therefore expected on both sides, so Mary's pregnancy was not good news of great joy to Joseph. In those days, it was vitally important to know who the father of any baby was, and it was considered the highest insult, dishonor, and scandal if a woman was impregnated by a man who was not her husband. In the Books Deuteronomy and Numbers in the Old Testament you can find the law that spells out the punishment for women who were unfortunate enough to get pregnant by someone who wasn't their husband. As we heard in the Gospel, that punishment could be divorce, but it could also be public stoning. Of course, we heard Joseph wasn't the kind of man who wanted Mary to suffer or die, he just wanted to quietly dismiss her, quietly divorce her, and quietly put the whole situation out of his mind. This makes some people praise him for being righteous, as he didn't want Mary publicly humiliated or possibly stoned. Others have pointed out that she still could have suffered without a husband's household to belong to, and those folks aren't too sure of Joseph's righteousness and instead judge him as more cowardly.

Whether he was righteous or just afraid, he was very human, we have the words of the angel that appeared to Joseph in his dream, who reached beyond Joseph's fear to help us understand this man who is more than just a figure in our crèche scenes. Did you notice the angel didn't tell Joseph to just "not be afraid", like we are used to hearing angels in the Bible say? The angel had a more specific message for Joseph; the angel's opening words to him were: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." The Greek could be translated to read, "Do not be afraid to companion with Mary as your wife," which I believe is worth mentioning because it points to a life long journey that not only includes Joseph, but implies that Mary and Joseph were to face life and what God was doing with them together. One person was not more important than the other, both were needed for their life together.

When I read the words of the angel, I notice the angel didn't say not to be angry, so Joseph may not have been feeling anger with Mary, which is how many of us might interpret this story, he was afraid to marry her. And I can't help but wonder why Joseph would have been afraid to marry the woman he had been engaged to? What was it about this pregnancy that was so terrifying that he just wanted out of the whole deal?

Was it the possibility of infidelity? Was he afraid to trust Mary? Was it the possibility that Mary wouldn't change her name? Or was it the explanation about the child she was carrying, that had come about through means that were just not normal? I know some commentators tell us Joseph didn't yet know the truth when he considered divorcing or dismissing Mary, but that isn't clear in today's Gospel. It is possible Mary could have told Joseph about her angelic visit and Joseph might have thought that didn't sound like the God he knew. Was Joseph afraid Mary was mentally ill? Was Joseph afraid of the scandal itself, that such a scandal could cost him his reputation or business? Or was the possibility that God could be involved be something Joseph really didn't want to have any part of because it was too full of unknowns? Was he afraid because now he couldn't imagine what role he would play in the family God was creating? Was he afraid because he felt displaced? I'm sure there are men and women who can relate to that fear.

Of course, we'll never know, but wondering what he was afraid of is a question worth reflecting on. I know many, many step-parents, myself included who are painfully familiar with the fear of choosing to love a child we know isn't really ours. Being the step-parent is difficult, as the step-parent can be seen as the uncomfortable reminder that a family is not always pure, a family is not always perfect, and that family itself can and often is complicated and messy. Of course, some chose not to, but most of us choose it anyway, like Joseph eventually did and like God chooses to love each and every one of us.

The uncomfortable truth about Joseph is that family doesn't always work out the way we think it should; family isn't always a smiling mommy, daddy and baby, which too many folks interpret our crèche or nativity scenes to imply. Joseph and his dreams point us to a God who became flesh not in a perfect family, but one shadowed by fear, disappointment and doubt, not unlike many families.

And that is good news. Because there are families who are hurting this year or this time of year, some for the first time, others for whom holidays like Christmas are always painful instead of joyous. The story of Joseph reminds us that Jesus did not come into a perfect family, he came into a human family, part

of which didn't even want him at first, so he could be human and join us in our humanity, even when we don't want him. Matthew's Gospel shows us Joseph played an important role in Jesus' birth when he obeyed the angel, even though doing so did not bring him financial stability, or job security, or a nice home, or any of the things most of us think are important for raising children. But what his obedience did do was help to begin the family of God, which is Christ and all of us, with all our shadows and foibles and fears and disappointments and hopes and joys, dysfunctions and laughter and tears.

Today is our very last Sunday in the season of Advent, a season that has often included facing uncomfortable shadows and Joseph reminds us both reality of nearness of our Christmas festivities and what Christ's birth can mean for us. Christmas is when God took the first steps to claim us all as family, God chose to love us so much God is willing to be with us, to die for us, and promises to one day bring this family of God's together as God dreams and longs for us to be. A family where there are no absences or exclusions caused by things like budgetary constraints like the movie *Toy Story* because in God's Family there is a place and a role for everyone, people of all genders, races, ages, abilities, and class, even you and me; all of us who chose, like Joseph, the life-giving Love of God.