

In a time when it is more socially acceptable to be cynical instead of believing, to respond to change or when life feels overwhelming by quitting or walking away instead of adapting, we need someone like Joseph in today's Gospel to show us there is another way. The way of God.

Today we have Matthew's version of Jesus' birth. Like in Luke's Gospel we will hear on Christmas Eve, we learned Mary and Joseph were betrothed or engaged, but not yet living together as a married couple. We also learned Mary was pregnant and Joseph was not the father. This can be insulting in any culture, and in the time and place Mary and Joseph lived, it was devastating. Not only did it mean an end to the possible dreams Joseph had about life with his wife, but it also most likely meant an end to Mary's promised security. An illegitimate pregnancy meant Joseph didn't have to follow through with his promise to marry her and could divorce her. In those days, a divorced woman could be killed at worst and shunned at best. If her family wasn't willing to take care of her, it meant she would be homeless. There wasn't much mercy, even for the righteous.

Today's Gospel tells us Joseph decided to quietly terminate their engagement in hopes of saving Mary from the worst. We learned this decision was evidence of Joseph's character, that he was good, what the author of Matthew's Gospel called a "righteous" man. That word is thrown around a lot these days, often with the word *self* in front of it, in which case it means someone who thinks they are right at the expense of relationships. But for the author and translators of the Bible the word "righteous" was a positive word and indicated a person whose heart was "tender towards God" and who lived their life by God's laws. In other words, a righteous person tried their best to follow God's ways in every situation. It also indicates Joseph believed in God. Which means, Joseph's decision to quietly divorce Mary, which still could have put her and her baby in peril, was – at that time - the righteous one to make.

And while Joseph believed in God, he did not believe the woman who was going to be his wife. If Mary had told Joseph her baby was conceived through the Holy Spirit, he didn't believe her. If that was the case, it makes the beginning of today's Gospel heartbreaking for both Mary and Joseph.

One of the things I love about God is when God calls us to something new, God will let us say no, even if we say it more than once. But God won't ever give up asking and calling us.

Which might be why God sent an angel to Joseph. Remember angels are God's messengers and when angels step into our lives it means God is up to something so new and different there aren't established plans or rules to help us understand what is going on. Sometimes we just have to trust God and believe, even when things like cultural norms we take for granted are disrupted.

That was essentially the angel's message. Don't be afraid to break the societal and religious norm, the angel told Joseph, because that is what marrying Mary entailed. By marrying her, Joseph not only legitimized her and her baby, but he also broke the expectation of what a family is supposed to look like. No more is the man the unquestioned head of the household who does the right thing in all circumstances. What the angel said God was calling Joseph to be a different kind of household where God was the center and he- Joseph- was to support Mary in her calling and to support Jesus in his and they, in turn, would support Joseph in his calling.

Joseph could have walked away. He could have said no again. He could have said that was too hard, too different, too difficult to believe. He could have worried about what his parents would say, or his neighbors, or his customers. A move like that could hurt his business and his place in his small village. He could have been afraid, and that would have been understandable; it's never easy to live an unconventional life.

Instead, Joseph made the hardest choice: he chose to believe. He chose to believe God and trust God would be with him, no matter what challenges or hardships his unusual family would meet. Where society expected division and an end of relationship, Joseph chose to make a family. Joseph chose love. Not necessarily the romantic love of the Christmas movies that seem to be everywhere this time of year. He chose God's love that does not shy away from the difficult, that doesn't abandon us when things get hard or even terrible but stays in it with us. Joseph chose hope instead of despair. Joseph chose love instead of fear. Joseph chose God and in so doing chose a new kind of family.

One commentator observed the family Joseph chose to make must have been a good and healthy one because of how Jesus talked about fathers. In his parables, fathers are mostly positive figures of love, forgiveness, and inclusion, such as in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus even calls God *abba*, a term of endearment rather than authority, that is translated *daddy*. The commentator surmised Jesus must have been heavily influenced by his relationship with Joseph to associate fathers with such tenderness and unconventional roles.

Many of us are aware that much is changing in the world, in our community, in our neighborhood, in churches and families. I often listen to people tell me they feel overwhelmed by the changes or are fearful that the changes might indicate a potential loss in status or prestige. Sometimes they will resort to cynicism, which might feel comforting amidst so much uncertainty. But cynicism only serves to further isolation instead of forming connections or relationships or adapting to the changes. It pushes away instead of making room.

Which is why we will always need people like Joseph from today's Gospel to remind us, the antidote to the harm of cynicism is belief. Not belief in any human system but belief in God. This kind of belief can help us remember changes can indicate God is at work, that God is up to something, creating once again, and calling us to be part of it. Joseph exemplified what it looks like to make room for God in our lives, which is the invitation of the season of Advent and is expressed in the collect we prayed at the beginning of the service. The one that states, at the second coming of Christ, may he find in each of us "a mansion prepared for himself."

This doesn't mean we are to build huge, excessively elaborate buildings like the mansions of the rich and famous. It means like Joseph we are to make room in ourselves to receive Christ, by countering cynicism by loving God, and being part of the family where God is the center and we support each other in our callings by sharing what we have, listening, forgiving, and looking for God at work in the world. The love of God creates its own kind of growth, which is how we can end up with something like a mansion inside of us, one that can grow even in times of challenges and changes. And just like God was with Joseph, God is right here with us in every challenge and change in our time.