

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmas 2015 2B  
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You have to feel a little sorry for poor Joseph. Nothing seems to be working out for him the way he planned. The woman he'd been betrothed to for a long time, perhaps since before either of them were even born, in the way things happened back then, is pregnant. Joseph knew he's not the dad, and Joseph knew that his life was now a shambles.

The thing about long engagements is you have a long time to think about what your future will be like – a long time to dream dreams and to make plans and fantasies. And suddenly those plans and dreams became worthless. Whatever Joseph had been dreaming of – the house; the happy family; tossing a football with his son in the park; growing old with Mary by his side – none of that is going to happen now. Mary is pregnant, he's not the father, and, according to the laws of his community, she and the father are to be taken out to a hillside and stoned to death. But Joseph quickly made a new plan. He'd have the marriage contract cancelled quietly, saving Mary's life and avoiding public scandal, and Mary and whoever this man is that she seemed to like better than him could get married and go start a new life in another village.

Not that Joseph would be spared any pain by that. Nazareth wasn't a big place, after all: just a village, not even a town. Everyone would know what happened, and

Joseph would be deeply shamed, which didn't mean he'd be embarrassed and feel bad about himself, it meant he would lose face and status in his community, no longer able to do business with the best customers, not welcome in the homes of respectable people, and unable to be choosy about whom might now be willing to marry him.

But God intervened and told Joseph to go against the laws and customs of his people and marry Mary anyway; that everything would work out for the best because, and this is the part that really makes me feel for Joseph, he had found favor with God.

Why is it that finding favor with God doesn't always seem like such a good thing? Moses must have wondered about that from time to time, wandering in the desert for forty years and never, in the end, seeing the Promised Land himself. Mary must have wondered about that when she saw her firstborn son arrested, convicted, and tortured to death. And the thought must have crossed Joseph's mind as he eloped with Mary, had his wedding banquet in a stable with cows and sheep and donkeys as the guests, and then went into exile in Egypt to save the life of someone else's son, that God's favor didn't seem exactly, well, favorable. God's plan didn't seem to be working out any better for Joseph than Joseph's own plan.

But Joseph said yes anyway. Joseph acknowledged Jesus as his own son, which is why the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel traces Jesus' lineage

through Joseph's side of the family. In those days, it was the claiming of a child as your own, rather than DNA, that made someone your child.

And Joseph kept on saying yes to God's plan. Through the arduous travel and sleeping in a stable (or not sleeping – does anyone really believe that baby Jesus, if he was fully human, didn't cry at all?) and through exile and return to the finger-wagging villagers of Nazareth, Joseph stuck with it. He went back to the old place as a changed person, and learned how to live among friends and family as a stranger. He learned, first hand, what it was like to live in the world of "God with us," of Emmanuel, which must have caused a major shift in his ideas about the role of a father.

And even, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, when Jesus, as a teenager, ran away in the big city, and Joseph and Mary found him in the Temple a few days later, and Jesus essentially told Joseph, "Don't you know I have to be about my father's business," which translates as, "you're not my real dad;" even then, over and over again, Joseph kept saying yes God's plan.

In my family, a couple of weeks ago we celebrated the eleventh anniversary of the adoption of our son. So I am grateful to be able to reflect on this scripture passage today. It affirms that what makes a family a family has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with sticking together; choosing each day to be a family, even

when the pressures of life or the difficulties of being or living with a teenager make that a challenge.

But more than that, it is a reminder of the folly of expecting that life will go according to your plans. Life always intervenes. God always has something more in mind for you than you can imagine. For you too have found favor with God.

And sometimes that can be pretty uncomfortable. Sometimes you have to skip the wedding banquet and get right on to the marriage. Sometimes it feels like the crucifixion comes before you've even had time to celebrate Christmas.

And sometimes it's the other way around. Sometimes the unexpected, the amazing, the joyful interrupts our ordinary plans and expectations, with the good perhaps more welcome but still no less disruptive to our lives than the bad.

And in our church family, just like in our lives, it may sometimes feel that way as well. When difficulties arise, they aren't part of anyone's original plan. And sometimes, as that timeline on the back wall of the church that the Search Committee asked you to create shows, in the long history of this community, even the new plans made to face new difficulties haven't always worked out as expected either. And now, as the transition process works its way through, and you look forward to welcoming a new Rector, it will soon be time for new plans.

So be prayerful and thoughtful at the Parish Annual Meeting this month as you choose the new leaders who will help shape those new plans. Choose wisely but

not cautiously. Recognize, as Joseph eventually did, indeed as you did when you decided to build this beautiful building and start gathering and worshiping in a brand new home, that the new thing to which God is calling is seldom the easy plan. It often isn't the plan that causes the least disturbance or public outcry. It might not be the plan that is most comfortable or even comfortable at all.

It might be the plan that leads to the stable. It might be the plan that leads to the cross.

But that is not such a bad thing. The poor, dark, humble stable is the place where Emmanuel is found; where we know that God is indeed with us. And remember that in Hebrew "Emmanuel" means "God with us" not just as physical presence, but also "with us" in the sense of being for us, of being on our side, as in "are you with us or against us?" And our God is definitely with us. Our God is definitely for us.

And if the humble stable is the place where we know that God is with us, then the shameful cross is the place where we learn to what lengths God will go for us. So if God is sometimes leading us into difficult places, hard choices, uncomfortable change, remember that the difficult places are where God comes to us, and where we are shown the unbelievable depth and breadth of God's love for us. Whenever we are being called to difficult places, it is because we are being called to where God can be found.

Amen.