

## Love Came Down at Christmas

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

Dec 18, 2022

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### *Isaiah 7:10-16*

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

### *Matthew 1:18-25*

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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'Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?

Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,

And told him to stand in the back of the crèche

background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?

God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful

in spite of the gossip in Nazareth,

in spite of the danger from Herod.

This man, Joseph, listened to angels

and it was he who named the Child Emmanuel.

Actually, Joseph probably stood in the doorway

guarding the mother and child or greeting shepherds and kings.

When he wasn't in the doorway,  
he was probably urging Mary to get some rest,  
gently covering her with his cloak,  
assuring her that he would watch the Child.

Actually, he probably picked the Child up in his arms  
and walked him in the night,  
patting him lovingly  
until he closed his eyes.

This Christmas, let us give thanks to God  
for this man of incredible faith  
into whose care God placed the Christ Child.

As a gesture of gratitude,  
let's put Joseph in the front of the stable  
where he can guard and greet  
and cast an occasional glance  
at this Child who brought us life.

I love this poem by Ann Weems. She is absolutely right that we are never quite sure what to do with the Joseph figure in the creche, and even less so what to do about the man who not the father yet was the parent of Jesus Christ. Joseph has a brief burst and flash of attention as he learns that his bride-to-be is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and then the child is born in and among the cattle and dirty shepherds and angel songs and royalty gifts after an arduous journey to Bethlehem, followed by a hurried escape into Egypt away from the wrath of Herod. Once Jesus is 12 years old and teaching the elders in the temple, Joseph disappears.

Joseph has done great, faithful, heroic things as a legal parent, as a step-parent, and he has so many lessons to teach us. He has not spoken a single word aloud in our gospel lesson yet he has spoken volumes about his faith and expressed the depth of his ability to trust. His silent "Yes," brought safety, security, comfort, strength and assurance to the infant Love that came down at Christmas, and to his mother. Yet in spite of all that he did, he is relegated to the role of a supporting actor among the incredible, splendid and star-studded cast.

Joseph was of the house of David, the ancestral line going back about 40 generations to King David, and also to the promise that the Messiah would be his offspring, his descendant.

Generations later Isaiah could speak, "Hear then, O house of David," to a people who were hopeless and discontent, failing to see what God was doing for them, failing to see the sign of Immanuel, of 'God With Us.'

Now it was time for God's promise to be fulfilled, and God sought out Joseph. The angel who preceded Jesus' birth began the good news by reminding Joseph just who he is, "Joseph, son of David." Just as David had had the responsibility to pursue the welfare of his people, to make political judgments that would lead towards national security, health and life, Joseph was given the responsibility to pursue the welfare, the security, the health and life of God Incarnate and the One chosen to give him birth.

Joseph, the one we tuck into the back of the stable, did all of this and we can still learn from his quiet lessons.

First, we learn to listen.

Listening was the first thing that Joseph did when he learned that his fiancé was pregnant. He did not dismiss the unbelievable news as an overactive imagination while he was asleep, nor did he respond in anger or hopelessness, although those would seem to be the perfect and immediate reactions for most of us. He was quiet, he listened, he was thoughtful, and not in the numbed silence of shocking news, but in the gentle spirit and faithful heart that was open and receptive to the Father of the Love being born at Christmas. His silence welcomed in God's love and call.

What bold new ways of seeing God's love in our own lives, in our world, can we find if we too begin by listening, by pausing to take in what is happening, to sit with it a bit just as it is? What unexpected predicaments, places and people are actually an invitation to seeing God's love in a whole new and unexpected way?

The second lesson we learn is how to move forward when facing chaos and crisis.

The whole story of Christmas is God's love for us among us. The way we most often hear that message is John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' Yet when Joseph encounters that truth it is so up close and personal he must act to bring the Son into the world safely despite all the odd dangers and complications, and then they must flee to escape the horrors of Herod. The One who came to give us eternal life has his own life in peril when he is only days old. The love, trust and faith of Joseph to say 'yes' to God even in the midst of such unknowns shows us that we too can move forward when we face a crisis, when we face chaos, when we face a seemingly insurmountable situation that does not seem to have any way to resolution.

The third lesson we learn is kindness, and that is not so much a lesson as a reminder in these Covid years when we see signs in stores and restaurants reminding us to be kind to one another, kind to the employees who did show up. Our world sadly needs a reminder that we are Human Kind and we are to be both.

After hearing that Mary was pregnant, Joseph planned to quietly divorce her, not disgrace her. Even before the angel spoke to him, he was righteous and kind, showing love when he could have shown rage, showing tenderness when he could have shown rejection. The Love that came down at Christmas was born into the care of one who was kind, caring and compassionate even in a most complex and challenging situation.

Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine. Love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Getting to the Front of the Stable by Ann Weems in 'Kneeling in Bethlehem,' The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1980, page 50