



THE PRESBYTERIAN
OUTLOOK

Advent Devotions: WEEK 2

— Theme of Joseph —

“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.’”
(Matthew 1:19-21).

These poems and prose reflections focus on Joseph’s story: his experience as Mary’s fiancé, his questions, his fears, his hesitations, his faith. We will also explore themes of parenting, patriarchy, the beauty and pain of childbirth, and scandalous pregnancies.

As you attend to these daily reflections, I invite you to call Joseph to mind, meditate on his story and locate yourself within it. Who are you in relationship to Joseph? How do you relate to his story? Or how do you not? Enjoy Joseph’s company this week and be blessed.

Sunday, December 4

POEM



"The Annunciation" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, c. 1852, Birmingham Museum and Gallery, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

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Joseph, before he awakes

I thought it would be up to me.
The fig, the sower, the seed,
the conquest.

No one told me
what to do when I was not
needed. I was taught to be
the conqueror
of fruit and field,
my dominion, my right. But
I wasn't even there.

What do you do when
you thought the story
began with you?

No one warned me
that something could end
and begin

without my input,
that this was enough:
the choice made,

a word passed
between a girl
and her God.

PRAYER

God, we can think of ourselves as more important than we are, considering ourselves the center of the story when the narrative really revolves around you. Humble us on this Advent journey. Awaken us to people who live and move on the margins, people who know what it's like to be dismissed and whose voices aren't included. Awaken us to our need for you. Amen.

Tuesday, December 6

POEM

Saving Grace



The Bible, once again, dares redefine
The notion “righteous” as much more divine
Than oft we make it when we think of laws
All kept, producing someone lacking flaws.
For Joseph’s righteousness stems from his will
To do a *gracious* thing — and thus fulfill
The law his son would later say is best,
The law of love, by which we all are blessed.

And how it blessed him! For he had this dream
That told him that no matter who it seemed
The father of this child-to-be had been —
Abusive soldier? Or perhaps some friend? —
There was another possibility
To lead both them – and all the world – to see
That Jesus, meaning “Yahweh saves,” still shows
That love for all is how God’s spirit grows.

SCOTT L. BARTON is an honorably retired member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia who had pastorates in Northern New York, Vermont and Philadelphia. Now living in western Massachusetts, he enjoys writing, hiking and singing with Boston Symphony’s Tanglewood Festival Chorus. His latest book is *Lectionary Poems, Year C: Even More Surprising Grace for Pulpit and Pew*

PRAYER

Amazing God, like Joseph, you bless us with grace upon grace, calling us to entertain alternative possibilities. As Joseph sought to understand Mary’s pregnancy, help us not pre-judge a situation or a person. We aren’t perfect and you don’t expect that of us. Help us live according to your law of love and share your grace with others. Amen.

Wednesday, December 7

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:1-7).

What does it do to a man in a patriarchal culture to not be the center of the story?

The emperor’s registration required Joseph and Mary to return to Joseph’s hometown. They would be registered under his name and his family line. Mary’s life and story is subsumed by Joseph’s. She, by marriage, is his.

But when it comes time for Mary to give birth, the story turns to focus on her, as the mother of Jesus. Joseph fades into a supporting character. I can imagine Joseph anxious and afraid, perhaps even running through the streets of Bethlehem to find a midwife. A first-time mother, Mary’s labor could have lasted 12 to 36 hours, hours during which many women in that time died. Where was Joseph during her labor pains? Sitting by Mary’s side? Pacing outside the stable? Luke doesn’t give us any hints; the details of Joseph’s whereabouts, his thoughts, his feelings are unnecessary to the story’s progression.

What a rare and humbling experience for a man, even a poor man like Joseph — to be removed from the center of the action, to not be the one in control. But I also imagine this made Joseph a better husband, father and companion to the mother of Jesus. Joseph could have disrupted this story of salvation if his ego demanded to be fed — if he insisted on centering himself and his story. Thanks be to God patriarchy did not have its way.

PRAYER

Holy One, we praise you for men who recognize humility as a strength, who listen well and are attentive to the needs of those whose stories surround them. As we approach the birth of Jesus this Advent, may we be mindful of positions of power that impede your faithful path and serve as stumbling blocks to the radical, counter-cultural message of the gospel. Free us, Holy God, for your path of faithfulness. Amen.

Thursday, December 8

POEM

Joseph Acquiesces to His Fate

PAUL HOOKER

is an honorably retired Presbyterian minister and former associate dean at Austin Seminary. He is the author of two volumes of poetry as well as other works in biblical studies and Presbyterian polity. He lives in Austin, Texas.

PRAYER

Holy God, in Joseph's day as in our own, men can fail their female partners, dismissing them and their pregnancies as 'problems' rather than people. God, guard and protect the women whose men are provoked by pregnancy. Melt and humble the hearts of unwilling fathers and bring hope to the hopeless this Advent. Amen.

I have a reputation to uphold.
Not that you would know, but in this town
I am looked up to, I am told,
The object of some praise, even renown.
This will not do, this girl whose belly holds
A child with father nowhere to be found.
I won't have scandal sniffing at my feet.
An end is what I need, quiet, discreet.

This is no time for children out of wed
Whose lineage is prone to imprecision,
Whose origin in some unmarried bed
Provokes a man like me to hard decisions.
Still, I am fond of her, and in my head
I cannot bear the thought of her derision.
Let her go some other where, not here;
A clinic where such problems disappear.

Fear not, you say? Do you know what that means?
You angels have no fear of human law
Designed to capture folk like us between
The cost of peace of mind and moral flaw.
Are surgical solutions so obscene
But carrying the child not the last straw?
You haunt my dreams and promise me salvation
But ignore the danger of the situation.

Yehoshua, you say, shall be the name
That echoes down the halls of history
And bears the hope of nations. But the blame
For offering hapless peasants just like me
False hope that one day hearts will change
Will fall upon my shoulders. Wait and see.
You want my word? Then let thy will be done.
Joseph may have a child, but God a Son.

Friday, December 9

POEM

First Sunrise

Did earliest birdsong greet the new arrival?
Were those cattle in their stalls lowing,
urgent to be milked, the hungry donkey curious
about the new and noisy neighbor in his feeding trough?
And how about the rooster's clarion call?
Did it disturb Our Lady's mending slumber,
waken Joseph to stir the dying embers of their fire?
The local shepherds had already hurried back
to tend their sheep, those wandering wise men
with their mystic gifts, yet to arrive.
What kind of breakfast could that new father
put together? What kind of waking greeting
might he give his new and first-born son?
Did he hold him arms-length high and sing to him
a morning song? Would he tenderly unwrap
all those entwining swaddling clothes
to count the infant's fingers and his toes?
Did he pass a rough yet gentle hand across
his Mary's resting brow in gratitude?

J. BARRIE SHEPHERD is an award-winning poet and an honorably retired PC(USA) pastor, the author of many books.

PRAYER

God bless the new fathers, full of awe and wonder, the tender caregivers ready to take over when mom needs respite. God bless those who respond to your call to protect the most vulnerable, to nurture the new, to swaddle love in gratitude. Savior God, may we greet your morning sun with equal praise for the miraculous gift that is life. Amen.

Saturday, December 10

POEM

First Night Question



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PRAYER

Holy One, for those of us who doubt our capacity to rise to the occasion of your call, who feel unfit, who ask “Why, me?” in the face of newly birthed responsibility, bless us with your grace. Grace for ourselves. Grace for those under our care. Grace for impossible possibilities beneath an ancient moon. Amen.

What could he, Joseph —
old beside this Mary —

possibly

possibly

teach Him,
the one swaddled by dark
in this last-resort makeshift
animal-room for a Son-
not-a-son? He looks around
the straw-strewn space
unfit for this king.
Already, he’s failed.

The seconds between
quiet stars and angels’
boisterous hallelujahs fill
with a moon — even more
ancient
than he feels — that spotlights
his calloused hands

possibly

possibly

With care, someone
constructed the manger;
someone nailed the roof.
He touches the infant’s
untrained fingers. Yes,
he will start with that.