

Psalm 80

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

<sup>1</sup> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
<sup>2</sup> before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!

<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

<sup>4</sup> O LORD God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.

<sup>6</sup> You make us the scorn of our neighbours;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

<sup>8</sup> You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.

<sup>9</sup> You cleared the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.

<sup>10</sup> The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches;

<sup>11</sup> it sent out its branches to the sea,  
and its shoots to the River.

<sup>12</sup> Why then have you broken down its walls,  
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

<sup>13</sup> The boar from the forest ravages it,  
and all that move in the field feed on it.

<sup>14</sup> Turn again, O God of hosts;  
look down from heaven, and see;  
have regard for this vine,

<sup>15</sup> the stock that your right hand planted.

<sup>16</sup> They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;  
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

<sup>17</sup> But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.

<sup>18</sup> Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.

<sup>19</sup> Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

## Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## Sermon

Some of you might be a fan of the television show *Call the Midwife*. John and I love it, although truth be told we can only watch the occasional episode, and always followed by a comedic show, because the story lines can be emotionally hard to bear. The show fictionalizes the true diaries of a nurse midwife serving a particularly impoverished corner of London in the years following World War II, during the establishment of the National Health Service. It's all about this group of young, unmarried nurse midwives who live in a convent alongside a group of nun nurse midwives, serving the women and families of the neighborhood. They provide prenatal and labor and delivery services, some pediatrics and gynecological care, but more than any of that, they provide for the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of their beleaguered neighbors. Without a doubt, it is the most humbling and affecting picture of what ministry looks like I've ever seen on television. Go and watch it, you will not be disappointed, I promise.

In the first season there's an episode in which a white woman gives birth to a baby with her white husband, who is over the moon about the pregnancy, but when the child is born the skin color of the child is anything but white. And when the midwife wraps up the child to present to the cuckold husband, he takes the baby, and with the greatest affection in his eyes declares the child the most beautiful thing he has ever seen, his own child, a part of

their family he has waited for, for so long. It's a really moving scene, and in many ways a sort of modern Joseph story.

Because Joseph, what he's afraid of is scandal. And not without reason, right? His fiancé is pregnant, and for that there's really only two reasonable explanations—either she and Joseph veered off the accepted and chaste path, which he knows isn't true, or Mary was off dallying with another town carpenter. The latter option being both scandalous and heartbreaking. We know neither is the case, but even knowing that, people talk, tongues wag, stories have a way of telling themselves, and even if the story isn't true, the damage to everyone's reputations is very much real.

And this isn't just some foreign, first century social more, distant to us today. While we might be marginally more comfortable with pregnancy out of wedlock, and certainly less strict about expectations of chastity, anything that pushes back on our somewhat puritanical social constraints causes friction and whispers. The scandal itself might be a bit different—but we know what it feels like to worry about shame. That others will know that thing about us we're embarrassed by, that story we try to hide.

For some families, even today, it's the secret gay nephew. For others it's pregnancy no one talks about. It might be the unexpected loss of a job, a legal suit you got caught up in, the parent in prison, or something else entirely—the lie you told about a coworker or the list of colleges your kid didn't get into. Sometimes we're ashamed of the physical ailments of our bodies, we don't want to tell others we're sick. In churches, we love to hide the skeletons of our congregational history deep in the closet. We don't tell the stories of the priest who stole the money, or the associate pastor who abused the students.

We know what it means to be afraid that someone will find out. To want to dismiss our own stories quietly, without fanfare.

But what's interesting about Matthew's gospel is that right from the start, he brings every potentially shameful story right into the bright light of day. Matthew starts with a genealogy of Jesus, and embedded in those names are all sorts of scandalous stories. Tamar, a foreign woman, who was the mother of twins by her father in law, Judah, who was an unrighteous man who thought he was engaging a sex worker, but it turned out to be his daughter in law. Rahab, who was the mother of Boaz, and also a foreign woman of ill repute. Boaz, of course, goes on to marry Ruth, another foreign woman, but not until after a particularly innuendo laden night on the threshing floor, well before any marriage was announced. Bathsheba, the mother of wise King Solomon, by David, the man who assaulted her and murdered her husband. And Solomon himself, righteous and beloved at first, but in time swayed by a love of foreign gods and idolatry. Name after name after name, stories of shame and secrets and lies and violence, all the up to, interestingly, Joseph. Not Mary, in Matthew's genealogy. Joseph. It reads, "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

Joseph's great fear of a shameful, messy, public, embarrassing pregnancy is the story of his entire family history. And yet, by taking Mary as his wife, by claiming Jesus as his child in

the act of naming him and raising him, Joseph does something important. It's the same thing as that episode of *Call the Midwife*—by refusing to be ashamed, Joseph goes beyond his cultural norms of “standard issue ethical behavior”<sup>1</sup> and he allows something big and important to occur. He allows Jesus to become a part of this grand, Davidic lineage. Which, for the gospel writers, is central to Jesus' claim as messiah.

And this, I think, is the encouragement of Joseph for each of us. It is not enough to simply act ethically. Because dismissing Mary would have been both totally ethical, and to do so quietly is even kind. Like Joseph, we must overcome our fear of shame, and instead act with abundant righteousness, even (and especially?) when it violates cultural propriety.

It means we do more than the acceptable actions of raising money for worthy causes or giving gifts for an angel tree. But maybe we also welcome into our midst the homeless and hungry, the lonely and difficult. If we have the ability to be generous, even if it costs us something, Joseph's example says, yes. Do it. Be generous. Be open to the movement of God's Spirit, calling you into unexpected and quirky actions. Tell hard stories, and be open to the truth.

This is why so many people find the current pope so compelling, right? Because he's done all sorts of things which violate the norms of his position and push radical hospitality into the center of the Vatican. He lives in a simple, plain apartment, not the papal palace. Sometimes he sneaks out into the streets of Rome to visit with the homeless and give money to the poor. For his birthday, he distributed sleeping bags to all those in need in his city. And he came right out and told Catholics across Europe that if they weren't hosting refugees and immigrants washing up on their shores in Italy and walking into Germany from the war in Syria and from conflicts across North Africa in their own homes and churches, then what kind of Christians did they think they were? The government should refuse your tax exempt status if you don't house refugees, he said.

This is the example of Joseph, the example of that father, the example of the Pope. To overcome our fears of impropriety and scandal.

Be righteous, and even counter cultural in your hospitality. Because by doing so, you welcome the very son of the most high as your own.

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren F. Winner, *Advent 4A, Connections Commentary*, pg 64.