

Christmas/Joseph's Tale

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Reading

from an article entitled, "Father and Child," by David Van Biema included in *Time Magazine*, December 19, 2005:

"...for a long time," says the Rev. Joseph Lienhard, an expert in the early church at New York City's Fordham University, "Joseph was not a popular saint." That's an understatement. His name did not pop up on any Western saints lists until 1000. The Koran, which dates from the 600s, dedicates a chapter to Mary but omits Joseph...Early Christian art sometimes omitted Joseph from the Nativity. When present, "he's either disinterested or separate, a doddering old man with a bald head or gray beard, a stock character." Joseph was occasionally painted sleeping through the event. This may have been a nod to his prophetic dreams, but [it is noted] that even among Catholic clergy today, "if someone says he's going to take a St. Joseph's meditation, it jokingly means he's taking a nap."

In outline, [Joseph's] life seems rich: after an initial moment of stunned disbelief at Mary's condition, he receives his own Annunciation in one of four angelic dreams; he marries her and gets her to Bethlehem; spirits mother and child off to Egypt when they are threatened by the murderous King Herod; then settles them in Nazareth. Yet there are strange omissions and truncations. Joseph is not described as present at Jesus' birth or the reception of the shepherds. The Egyptian trip is not actually recounted. The last reference to Joseph as a living person—a single sentence—occurs when Jesus is 12, shortly after Christ has made a rather cutting distinction between his parents on earth and his real "Father." Joseph's death goes unrecorded.

Some say he was not my son. That I was not his father...not his *real* father.

What do they know about it, I'd like to know?

Son of God, said his followers. *Son of Mary*, said his detractors, smirking at the scandalous implications. *Son of Man*, he said of himself. *Son of Man*...think about it.

But the Gospel writers get rid of me early on. I'm there at the beginning of their stories and then, poof, not mentioned again. And it's true...I wasn't there for many of the stories they tell. Fact is I wasn't there for some of the stories they tell that have me in them...but that's another story.

How it happened, Mary was betrothed to me, and she came to me one day in a frenzy, I don't know what else to call it. Upset, but not just upset...happy, too. Crazy-like, laughing and crying at once, saying an angel had come to her and her son, (*her son*, she said) would change the world. The mighty would be brought low. The poor would be exalted...You, me, she said, *us!* Roman power is as nothing

against God.

Then she saw my face; shocked, devastated, humiliated, and she said again that this was of God. She knew how it looked, but she knew what she had been told, too, and this was of God...and she started crying. “What will we do?” she said. “What will you do now?”

Because she knew what I was supposed to do. And so did my family and my friends.

“She’s been visited alright,” they said, “but not by an angel. You don’t need this kind of trouble, Joseph.”

And they saw the pain in my eyes and said, “Just walk quietly away from it all...people will forget.”

“What about her,” I said. “What now?”

“You can’t change what’s happened,” they said.

But what *had* happened? I didn’t know then...Can’t say I know for sure now.

But I couldn’t leave her. I loved her, which wasn’t always the case with betrothals. I loved her and could not walk away, no matter what had happened.

Matthew has an angel visiting me in his Gospel, telling me what I had to do. I wish. An angel could have corroborated things for me, but the truth is that I just felt it in my bones, I just knew deep inside that I had to stay with her, that I had to take care of her, that part of me would always be with her... Against the best advice of all my family and friends and the history and customs of my people, I had to stay with her, no matter how it looked.

And when I told her, she just smiled and acted like she knew it all along. Like she knew more than I did. There were many times my doubts found rest within her certainty.

But what about all those other stories told by Matthew and Luke? A census throughout the land? God knows, we paid steep taxes, but thankfully they didn’t make us travel to Bethlehem to pay them. No, they ripped the money from us, the food from our mouths, wherever we happened to be. Herod’s massacre of Jewish babies? Couldn’t prove it by me...but he was about as mean and cruel as they come, so anything bad you can say about him is true even if it’s not true...if you know what I mean.

Shepherds? Magi? I didn’t see them. And it wasn’t because I was asleep, like some of the painters have pictured me. I was awake. Alert. Waiting. And there *was* a miracle, of sorts, though not angels or stars or visitors from the East.

See, we were all alone, the three of us, when Jesus was born. The Messiah.

I knew that it was almost time and I left to find a midwife. I walked outside, turning toward the village, but I was stopped by...something...and I looked to the sky in amazement. And I looked up into the heavens and saw birds, stopped, as if frozen in midair. And I saw people across the way, crouched beside a fire, eating, but their hands were held motionless midway to their mouths. And there were sheep being driven, but they were perfectly still; and the shepherd stood with his staff raised, unmoving. And I saw the river, held in its flow, and saw kids on the bank, drinking from the stream, with droplets hanging from their mouths, suspended in midair. It was not long, the space of two or three breaths, and indeed it was as if the earth itself had inhaled deeply and was holding its breath...

And then I heard him cry out, a new voice broke through the stillness, and the whole world was set in motion once again. The birds moved off into the distant sky. The people ate and laughed. The sheep moved along in front of the shepherd who came along behind them, grumbling, angry. And the water flowed once again. I could hear it, as I could hear the children's' laughter.

When I returned, she was holding Jesus in her arms already, gazing upon him as if she knew him completely and as if she was waiting for him to tell her a secret all at once. They were a world unto themselves. I could not enter it but I could guard its boundaries, making sure they were safe, and in this moment it felt like this is what all my life had pointed toward.

Things changed later. She loved him with all of her strength and could have gladly held him like she had when he was newborn all of his life. Though both Jesus and I were thankful beneficiaries of Mary's seemingly infinite capacity for love, she was protective of Jesus to the point of immense frustration, not only for me but for the boy as he grew. He would come to me for permission to play with the other children, which I would gladly grant, and then Mary would come looking for him:

"Are you crazy?" she would ask me, eyes ablaze with anger. "Do you remember who he is?"

"I am quite aware of who he is," I would say. "He is Jesus, a five(or six or seven or eight)-year old boy, who would like to escape from his mother long enough to play with the other children."

She would continue to try and glare at me as I enfolded her in my arms. "It will be okay," I would whisper, "It will be alright." But I don't think I ever convinced her. I didn't have the certainty that she did.

And it wasn't the anger in her eyes that bothered me so much, it was the pity. Poor Joseph...he just can't understand the importance of all of this. He doesn't realize how special Jesus is...

Well, that part I got to know, but I wasn't always glad about how special he seemed to be. The neighbors picked up on all that Mary felt about him and, rather than drawing them to Jesus, they were frightened of what such a person might do to them. They accused him of spreading illness to those who did not please him; causing calamity to befall the families of those boys who bested him at games; one time I heard screaming and came out to find a mother crying over a boy spread out motionless on the ground and Jesus peering just above from the roof of the house where the boy had apparently fallen

from. “Your Jesus killed him!” she screamed at me. “That terrible child killed my son!”

I told him to come down. “He got what he deserved,” Jesus said, “He wasn’t paying attention to where he was walking.” And I could see the hurt and pain in his eyes from all the years of people treating him as if he was different; people fearing him; hurrying away and whispering. I knew the callous words came from the fact that he couldn’t escape who he was destined to be to be just another boy...but I couldn’t let unfeeling words pass either. “Jesus, get down here right now!” The mother’s wailing led me to such shame and frustration that, by the time Jesus walked to me, I angrily grabbed his ear and twisted until I knew that it hurt, and then twisted a little further. “Apologize to this woman,” I hissed through gritted teeth, “and then get home and pray for forgiveness.”

After he fought off my grip, he looked straight into my eyes and said, “Some seek and do not find. Some don’t know enough to seek. You are not the one who guides my actions,” and he walked quietly over to the mother and the boy and, taking the boy’s hand, said, “Simeon, arise!” The boy’s chest convulsed with a breath, and Jesus said, “Arise now, and tell them. Did I throw you down?” The boy, Simeon, coughed and looked at him uncomprehendingly as his mother scooped him up in her arms, crying and laughing now with relief, and ran back to her home. “Did I throw you down, or was it I who raised you up?” Jesus asked after they had left, and I wondered to whom those words were directed.

It was like that between us. Push/pull. Love/...and something else. He was drawn to me more as he got older, coming into my workshop, talking idly about this and that, but his eyes were always on the horizon, looking toward a destiny that I could not understand, and he let me know that he knew that I could not understand. But that is maybe not so different from any child, really, which I was to find out later with our other children. Still, there was a particular tension between us...an explosiveness.

When he was twelve, we went to Jerusalem for the Passover. On the way home, the second day of our travel, Mary approached me. “Where is Jesus?” she asked.

“You’re asking *me*?” I said.

“I thought he was with you. I haven’t seen him since we left.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said. “You let him out of your sight for a whole day?”

But the time for my joking soon passed, and I apologized to Mary as we realized Jesus was nowhere to be found. The last place either of us had seen him was Jerusalem, so back to Jerusalem we went. After hours of frantic searching, we found him in the temple, surrounded by scribes, and he was speaking as their equal, asking questions, offering observations on this or that verse.

Mary grew angry as the fears of the last two days dispersed, and she was made angrier by the calm way with which he acknowledged (*barely* acknowledged) our presence. “Why would you worry us so?” she asked him. “Why would you treat us like this?” And he turned from her to look at me and said, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Luke has the gall to say at the end of this story that Mary and I did not understand what Jesus said. We understood. Mary understood that Jesus was speaking of God. And I understood that he was saying, “Here I am in *my Father’s* house. Not *your* house. That is not my home...You are not my father. But *here* is my home.” And I turned to depart, knowing that even if he came with us now, he was already gone.

Things got more complicated between Jesus and his mother, though. Mary felt that he was the Messiah, and that she would have a hand in guiding his destiny, that that angel who had visited her so long ago had entrusted her with this divine duty. I knew, that whatever awaited him, and whatever he had to do to face it, I was not going to be able to control it. That had always been the case. He had made that abundantly clear.

But, see, Mary was a true believer, and the problem with true believers is that, *when they doubt you, they do so with the same fervor* with which they believed. When Jesus began his ministry, Mary went on a campaign to save him from himself. She worried about the crowds that gathered to hear him, the murmuring among the Pharisees that he was crazy, the rumors circulating among the villages that he was, if not divine, demon-possessed...she convinced our sons, James, Judas and Simon, to go with her to rescue Jesus, to bring him back to the safety of our home...as if time could be turned back. My heart ached for her...because I wished to do the same...and because I knew she would fail.

They met with a hostile reception as they attempted to force their way through the crowd that had gathered around Jesus. Finally, when someone alerted Jesus to their presence, Mary got as good as I did from him when he was twelve.

“My mother and brothers are here?” he said, “Who are my mother and brothers?” Then, with a smile and that gaze that drew everyone in, he opened his arms to all who had gathered and said, “Here are my mother and brothers! Who ever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Good for the crowd. Not so for Mary.

It wasn’t long after that that our son, James, (who had ironically been the one to fight with Jesus the most growing up) that James left to follow his brother. Sometimes Mary, I think, wished that angel had never shown himself to her.

Still, we did what we could. We provided the home that we knew how to provide. If we didn’t always understand him; if he pushed us away when we tried to pull him closer; if we could not save him from the fate that awaited him; God in heaven knows that we never stopped loving him.

So was I his father, you ask? Did *he* think so? [Philip](#), bless him, wrote a Gospel that didn’t make it into your Scriptures (as did [James](#) and [Thomas](#), who tell some truth about me), but Philip said that Jesus did indeed think of me as a father. Why else would he pray, “My Father, who is in heaven,” distinguishing this father from the earthly one he had; and the only one he could have known was me. That provided

comfort to me when I was bitter toward Jesus, and angry at God, and would have challenged God himself to love Jesus more than I could...but maybe he did think of me as Father, I thought. Certainly, I thought of him as my son...there, I said it.

But discarding bitterness is dangerous; it leaves you open to pain. When I heard that he was crucified, I wept with something of the agony that I should have been able to spare him, I cried for all that I had not done or said. And then...then I heard some of what he had spoken from the cross...and when I heard that he said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," I thought, for just a moment, that he might have been speaking to me. And for that moment, the world was still, and I was, I swear to you, *I was able to forgive* the Romans, and not only the brutal Romans, but the ignorance that causes violence everywhere all through the ages, and I was able to forgive my beloved Mary for pitying me sometimes, and even Jesus himself, Jesus my son, for the harshness with which he had rejected being mine so that he could belong to the world.

I forgave those who had snickered when I walked by, taking me for a cuckolded fool. I forgave those writers who, distant from the oppression we suffered, romanticized humiliation by calling it humility. I forgave those who pictured me as weak, inattentive, sleepy, or absent at the profound moments they depicted.

I forgave more, even, than I thought I could bear, because I forgave God himself for creating the painful, pitiless rhythms in which we move, of childbirth and growing and parenting and separation and dying and not knowing what will come and not saying what we should and despair and hope and struggle...and I praised him, too, for those very same things, and most of all, for the faith we hold onto, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents, *all* family (and who, after all, *is* our family), family and friends, fellow travelers and frail creatures that we are...we hold to the hope that seems so hard to grasp sometimes, and at other times carries us effortlessly through the hardest times...the hope that they will see, those around us, however shrouded it may become in the dust of the day's travels, that they will know, however we may have stumbled along the way to showing them, that they will come to understand, those we love, how much we love them.

I wished nothing more for myself, and I wish it for all of you.

*Many thanks to the authors of the Gospels of [Luke](#), [Matthew](#), [Mark](#), [Philip](#) and the Infancy Gospels of [Thomas](#) and [James](#) for providing springboards for speculation on what Joseph might have said.