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A Righteous Man

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While on internship in Saratoga, California, I recall preaching a sermon on this morning's gospel text about Joseph in which I declared that Joseph deserved an award for the best supporting actor in the Bible

Here's my case: the story of Jesus can't move forward without him!

1. He's Mary's betrothed and so he has a decision to make and we kind of sit on the edge of our seats to see what he'll do
2. It's his family which is descended from the line of David (former, beloved king of Israel) from which the Messiah is anticipated to come so you know his role in this is actually quite significant
3. He has a dream in which an angel of God appears to him and it gives him the confidence he needs to stay with Mary and adopt the baby when he is born by giving him the name Jesus as the angel directed him,
4. and then after a few stories from his youth, we never really hear about Joseph again – he requires no fame or fortune for being the father of Jesus, he simply fades into the background

So crucial, and yet so behind the scenes – very different from how Mary, Jesus' mother is portrayed – we hear about her all the way through Jesus' life

Joseph is such an important character, and yet this way he takes a back seat is so unlike a lot of the other powerful male characters in the Bible

Even John the Baptist who we've been reading a lot about in Advent has a bigger personality and punch than Joseph the adopted FATHER of Jesus

He's a truly special character and I still think he deserves the best supporting actor award

Interestingly, the attribute of Joseph that caught my eye this week is one that I didn't really pay attention to all those years ago, but at the very beginning of our gospel reading this morning, Joseph is described as "a righteous man"

I've always been curious as to what really makes someone righteous

To be honest, I have kind of mixed reactions to someone being described as righteous

It can be a good quality – like "wow, that person is truly righteous"

Or it can kind of be a sarcastic dig – like "wow, that person is truly righteous"

In our speech and interactions, it really can be either way, can't it?

If you google the term, the first definition you'll get is "(of a person or conduct) morally right or justifiable; virtuous"

While accurate, this definition kind of nudges me toward my more sarcastic interpretation of "righteous"

For some reason, I picture someone who sits at the pinnacle of the moral high ground almost like a moral know-it-all talking down to all those lowly amoral beings who don't know better

I've experienced some of those in my lifetime, have you?

"wow, that person is truly righteous"

The attribute of being "righteous" in the scriptures is a little differently nuanced

Debi Thomas notes in her reflection on this text: “The Gospel describes Joseph as a ‘righteous man,’ which is to say, a man devoted to God, and concerned with clean, ethical living...He follows the rules.”¹

So the righteous in the Bible are not just the moral know-it-alls, they’re also the religious goody two-shoes who follow all the rules

OK, clearly, I am stuck in sarcastic mode

Joseph is described as a righteous man, someone who knows the social norms of his time as well as the religious rules and expectations and navigates them erring on the side of trying to do the “right” thing

He’s not depicted as a finger-waving, looking-down-his nose type of righteous

Debie Thomas notes: “Though Matthew doesn’t elaborate,” on what he means by Joseph being a righteous man, “I think we can safely assume that Mary’s betrothed is not a guy who likes to make waves, or call attention to himself, or venture too close to controversy. Like most of us, he wants an orderly life. He’s honest and hardworking. He follows the rules. He practices justice and fairness, and all he wants in exchange is a ‘normal,’ uncomplicated life. Is that too much to ask?”

So what is this righteous man to do with a pregnant fiance knowing the baby isn’t his?

Well he sets out to follow the social and religious norms of his day – he plans to leave Mary

He doesn’t want to make a big scene out of it, he doesn’t want Mary to experience the societal shame and outcasting that could happen in this instance, but, to be fair, he, too, doesn’t want to experience shame and

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2484-into-the-mess>

outcasting and so to him, the best moral and religious decision to make is to leave her...walk away

Joseph was, after all, a righteous man

But then something happens

An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and reveals God's purpose for him and for his family: "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"

We often hear about Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, but this is an unnamed angel's annunciation to Joseph

Mary's response to Gabriel's annunciation is this radical "OK, yes!" – "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."
(Luke 1:38)

Joseph's response to his annunciation is much quieter – he doesn't say anything – yet equally astonishing: "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife"

It doesn't have the same kind of dramatic flare as Mary's response followed by her wonderful Magnificat!

But, Joseph's response truly is as radical – for the rule-following, no-wave-making "righteous" man he was described to be, Joseph's reaction to the annunciation is actually to break the rules and risk the consequences

"God's call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity," Debie Thomas writes. "It required him to become the talk of the town — and not in a good way. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created."

“In other words,” she writes, “God’s messy plan of salvation required Joseph — a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy — to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. So much for living a well-ordered life.”

God’s plan took Joseph’s life from orderly to chaotic; from simple and straight forward to complicated and messy; from fitting within the societal and religious norms of his day to bucking the system and treading a new path

What a 180 for this righteous man!

But, this all got me thinking, and realizing, that I was hearing Joseph described as “a righteous man” only as a pre-annunciation descriptor of the man

Almost like, “now here was this very square, type A, moral high ground, goody two-shoes, righteous man named Joseph and he was going to do the very square, type A, moral high ground, goody two-shoes, righteous thing and leave his fiancée except God intervened and he became a messy, real, faithful man in response”

But, what if Matthew’s description of Joseph as “a righteous man” isn’t just a pre-annunciation descriptor but one based in a deeper knowing of Joseph’s character

Is Joseph’s response to the angel’s annunciation no less righteous?

It is in fact deeply righteous and authentically so in a non-sarcastic way

What if righteous can, sometimes, mean following rules, acting on what we and society accepts as right, and toying the line

AND, righteous can mean breaking the rules, questioning what we and society have told us is right, and living into the messy reality of human need and experience

What if being righteous is, as we experience it from both Joseph *and* Mary, simply and yet super complicatedly saying “yes!” to God’s vision and plan for you and for the world even if, or when, being faithful to God is extremely risky, messy, and uncomfortable?

The common thread to a righteous life is not the rules we follow for the sake of having rules but the ways rules help us build relationship with God

righteousness isn’t acquiescing to norms to fit in socially, but adopting societal norms that fit the teachings and morals of God

So whether we’re following rules or traditions or norms, or whether we’re breaking the rules, bucking the system, and ditching the norms – the most important question for those who are righteous is: are we being faithful to the vision and calling of our God?

Not a problem when God’s vision and calling fit well into our religious and social norms, BIG problem and MUCH worry when living a righteous life requires us to challenge and break those norms

“No wonder that the angel’s first words to Joseph were, ‘Do not be afraid,’” Debie Thomas writes. “If we want to enter into God’s messy story, then perhaps these are the first words we need to hear, too. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid when God’s work in your life looks alarmingly different than you thought it would. Do not be afraid when God upends your cherished assumptions about righteousness. Do not be afraid when God asks you to stand alongside the scandalous, the defiled, the suspected, and the shamed. Do not be afraid when God asks you to love something or someone more than your own spotless reputation. Do not be afraid of the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible.

“Do not be afraid of the mess. The mess is the place where God is born.”

My list of reasons Joseph deserved the best supporting actor award had four points...until this week

this week, I'd add a 5th – he embodied righteousness

He embodied faithfulness, he embodied striving to live according to how he thought God wanted him to live and act and he was willing to righteously change those ways when God's vision for him and the world became more clear

I know that you never get stuck following rules for the sake of following rules, and I know you never just follow social norms for the sake of fitting in

But if you ever did, and if you ever needed a reason to think about what the motivations are you have for what you chose to align with or how you chose to act, what rules you choose to follow and which ones you chose to challenge – Joseph is an important distant relative to remember

Joseph was “a righteous man”

Thanks be to God, Amen!