

Based on *Matthew 1:18-21. *An Angel Appears to Joseph*

**incarnational translation below*

One Christmas Eve, without knowing it, I assigned the Lesson in which the angel Gabriel visits Mary to an active duty police officer.

The congregation, in all of its Christmas joy, settles into the pews, eagerly awaiting the story of hope, the contemplative prelude concludes, the lights dim to an angelic halo, and the deep contralto voice of a woman nicknamed Spaz barks out: *You WILL conceive in your womb! You WILL bear a Son! And you WILL name him Jesus!*

Half the congregation trembles in fear, including small children. The other half desperately tries to hold back their laughter. Drill Sargent Gabriel has come to town with a lump of coal for anyone who dares reject the call of God this Christmas!

I was mortified, afraid I had ruined Christmas for everyone. But in hindsight, perhaps the Spirit was up to something. These stories of angels visiting Mary and Joseph have become so blasé, so much an accepted part of the narrative of Jesus, maybe we do need to shake them up a bit in order to glean deeper meaning from them.

Take the story of Joseph and his dreaming in our Lesson today, this Fourth Sunday of practicing transformative compassion, in the vision of Isaiah, which makes the world, finally, well. The First Sunday of Advent called us to hold onto the light, as if it were a flashlight, leading us up the holy mountain of God. The Second Sunday of Advent called us to personal transformation, rooted in compassion for the children of the world. The Third Sunday of Advent revealed the compassionate heart of God, leading us ever toward home. Today we have the genesis of Jesus, according to Matthew's Gospel, with an angel and a dream and a bewildered-yet-compassionate Joseph trying to make sense of scandal.

In hindsight, two thousand years later, the Drill Sargent Gabriel might actually make sense. For us, the choice seems predetermined, destined to be, a statement of fact, we cannot imagine otherwise. Joseph *WILL* take Mary as his wife; Joseph *WILL* adopt Jesus as his own; Joseph *WILL* name the child Jesus, which is the Latin form of Joshua, which means *God saves*. How could it be otherwise?

The translation I offer today tries to remind us it very well could have been otherwise. Joseph could have stoned Mary to death for adultery. He could have submitted her to the painful public shaming of divorce. Instead Joseph acts with compassion to protect her life and the life of her child by letting her leave quietly. For the sake of our story, that could have been enough.

But true compassion, genuine compassion, from the Latin which means to *suffer with*, does not stop with what is just enough. In our Lesson today, Joseph contemplates this deeper meaning of compassion. He prays for guidance in how best to *suffer with* Mary. And he comes to a bold realization. If Joseph really wants to *suffer*

with Mary, he could actually go through with the marriage! And if he does go through with the marriage, he could actually - perhaps *finally* - have a descendant of his own! And if he goes through with marriage and if he adopts the child as his own, perhaps Joseph could even find his own healing, wholeness, and hope through this child that came into his life in quite the unusual way!

Whether it is an angel that appears to him in a dream or instead something more like an *aha* moment through the practice of prayer, Joseph receives a message of mercy in our Lesson today. And more importantly, he acts on it.

Which is our final hope, as well, this Fourth Sunday of our own compassion transformation from Advent through Epiphany. Sometimes, as with Joseph, compassion means sucking it up in circumstances we did not want and would never choose on our own. Sometimes, as with Joseph, compassion means going deeper into the well of empathy than just plain *being nice*. Sometimes, as with Joseph, compassion requires a radical reorientation of our own world in order to make mercy possible in the world of another.

No matter what, as with Joseph, compassion helps *us* as much as it helps the supposed recipient of that compassion. And at the end of the day, as with Joseph, the recipient of our compassion may very well end up saving the world.

*Matthew 1:18-21

This is how
the genesis of Jesus Christ
came to be:

His mother, Mary,
having been betrothed to Joseph,
but before they lived together,
was discovered to be with child
by a sacred spirit.

Joseph, Mary's betrothed,
who lived justly,
but had no wish
to make a public example of her,
intended to release Mary privately.

Joseph had been praying about all of this.
when suddenly ... *enlightenment!*
A message from God through a dream:

*Joseph, son of David,
Don't be afraid
to associate yourself publicly
with Mary as your wife.*

*What has been generated within her
is from a sacred spirit.
Mary could bear your descendant,
and you could call him Jesus,
because he would heal his people
from all of that holds them back.*

"Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places" (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching, 62).*