

Advent, Day 17
Read Matthew 1:18-25

Tuesday, December 18

“When Joseph awoke...he took Mary home as his wife.” Matthew 1:24

SCANDAL

Could it have a worse beginning? Even before the story gets started, there is a scandal.

Joseph must have been a very rare individual. The law was very clear. A woman who was betrothed in marriage was the property of the man to whom she was engaged. Their engagement was as good as a marriage. A woman proved guilty of being involved in an adulterous relationship was to be stoned to death.

The sentence was harsh for a reason. Children and bloodline were evidence of the blessing of God. A woman who violated that sacred trust could not be allowed to live, and if she carried a child from such an adulterous affair, it was seen as evidence of her sin, and could not be allowed to exist, either.

Joseph was perfectly within his rights to publically denounce Mary and allow Israelite justice to be performed. But evidently he had more compassion than that. Perhaps he considered Mary's age and her relative innocence. Perhaps he just didn't want the public airing of dirty laundry. Whatever the reason, he was prepared to simply call off the marriage and put Mary aside, leaving her to deal with her shame in whatever way she could. He decided not to press the issue and give the law a chance to make up for any damage to his own ego. She might be a single mom, but at least she would be alive. Her family might choose to care for her.

But then God broke in.

Have you ever had anything like that happen? I believe I have. Every now and then I get one of those gentle nudges that speaks to my heart about something that needs to be done, or someone I need to call. It hits me at the level of my spirit and causes me to break whatever routine I had scheduled for the day and do something different. Sometimes it sounds like my conscience. Sometimes it's just an urge. Sometimes it's almost like a voice that draws me into an internal dialogue.

I believe that God speaks to us in many ways, and often. We don't always pay attention.

I'm reminded of one of the stories in Rabbi Gellman's little book, *God's Mailbox* in which he has a dialogue between Adam and God. After leaving the garden there seems to be a long time of silence between God and Adam. One day Adam begins to complain about God deserting him and not speaking to him. God gently replies, *“Adam, I've talked to you every single day. But whereas, in the garden, it was quiet and you could hear me easily, out here there is more noise, and you have too listen more carefully.”*

The scripture says that God spoke to Joseph in a dream. And Joseph listened.

God knew the kind of father Joseph would be. He knew that Jesus would need a father who accepted him as his own and loved him unconditionally. Jesus would need to learn that lesson about unconditional love, forgiveness, and compassion.

So maybe Jesus learned that lesson first from this quiet man who would not turn Mary away, but took her home and raised Jesus as his very own son.

Jesus never turned anyone away, either, no matter how tired he was, or how beleaguered. He always had compassion. He talked a lot about forgiveness and love.

It was a lesson he learned from both his fathers.