

Joseph and the Nativity

Although this is not the season for it, I am a great fan of baseball. When I was growing up the Saturday Game of the Week with Dizzy Dean as a regular feature watched by my father and myself. When I was in middle school, a second cousin was drafted by the then Milwaukee Braves as a pitcher. While Tony played for them they moved the franchise to Atlanta which made it possible for us to actually go and attend games. During the same time that Tony was on that pitching staff they had another well-known pitcher—Phil Niekro. If you are also a baseball fan you know that he was famous for a particular pitch—the knuckleball. We often use an expression from baseball about another pitch—the curve ball when we say someone has been thrown a curve. It starts out one place and ends up in another one. You might say that God is good at throwing curve balls. Many of the acts we learn about through Scripture tell us that God acts in unexpected ways, in unexpected places. But I would say that what God tossed into Joseph’s life was more like a knuckleball. Curve balls may start out in a different area, but where they land is usually predictable by the pitcher and catcher. The knuckleball is another thing entirely. For those who aren’t familiar with this type of pitch. The knuckleball is thrown relatively slowly and with barely any spin upon the ball. This means that as it heads toward the batter and catcher, the airflow over the seams causes movement in the path. This movement is unpredictable. So the pitch is hard to hit. It is even harder for the catcher to catch because of that unpredictable movement. It seems to me that God threw a knuckleball into the life of Joseph and Mary. Mary’s unexpected pregnancy was a challenge to both of them. Today we read a portion of Matthew’s description of events surrounding the birth of Jesus. This narration is not what we are accustomed to hearing when we think of the nativity. Not only is there no description of the Angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary, the birth itself is covered with only two verses. The first verse in today’s passage is “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” And then in the verse which begins chapter 2 it states: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea...” Matthew agrees that Mary was the mother of Jesus. That is even covered in the extensive genealogy of Jesus which he begins with Abraham and ends with this: “and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” But Matthew tells us more about this man who God chose to raise the Son he sent into the world than does Luke. Our passage begins by saying: “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.” Since Joseph doesn’t receive any visit from Gabriel telling him what is going on, we don’t know how he discovers Mary is pregnant. He only knows that he is not involved. Knowing he was not the father of this child, the expectations that he had for his life, for their life together would have been totally jumbled up in ways that he would not have seen coming. Life had thrown a knuckleball at Joseph and his plans for a life with Mary. The next verse states: “her husband Joseph, being a righteous man” introduces us to Joseph’s dilemma. Joseph, even though the relationship is translated as an engagement first, he is described as Mary’s husband in the second, not her fiancé. In that time and place engagement was a specific designation with formal words of consent. It was a legal contract and a pledge of marriage. The entire community would have considered them husband and wife, the wedding was held later when the bride and groom were joined by friends for a feast to celebrate actually

joining and forming their household. Under these conditions, Mary was subject to more than shame and disgrace by their community...she was guilty of adultery. According to Mosaic Law, Joseph as a righteous man could publicly divorce her freeing himself from the contract and asking that she be stoned to death. Being a righteous man, Joseph turns to the Torah. He knows that Deuteronomy gives stoning as a remedy for adultery, but also offers the option of casting her aside. Joseph seeks to honor the Law and also show compassion so he is unwilling to expose her publicly and plans to dismiss her quietly. Joseph probably figures he is being faithful to God, merciful to Mary, and bringing order and control back into his life. At this point Joseph finds that even this plan is not going to happen according to his expectations. Now he has a visit from an angel in a dream which brings him a strange message. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived by her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Joseph doesn't get the dramatic appearance of the Angel Gabriel giving him the news that Mary will conceive. He gets an unnamed angel in a dream after the pregnancy is a fact. The Greek word translated here as angel just means messenger. Joseph must have been totally at sea and confused. He has been betrayed. He must have been deeply distressed over what has happened; feeling disappointment in Mary's behavior, hurt by it. All these things must have been in his mind, and then he has this dream. When we read the account from the gospel of Luke, we see the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus. And that is appropriate. But when we read in Matthew about the birth, what we see is that Mary and Joseph are not just characters in a play or figures in a stained glass window. They are flesh and blood people who have been thrown a knuckleball by God. It seems that the first thing God's messengers say to those who are on the receiving end is: Do not be afraid. Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid. The dream angel began the message to Joseph the same way. In both of the people chosen by God to play a role in the plan for the reconciliation of the world, their first response is fear. The Hebrew has two words for fear, pachad and norah. Pachad is the fear of the phantom: the fear of things of which we do not need to be afraid; the fear of failing before we even try; the fear of what others will say or think about us. It is amazing how often this type of fear becomes the way we organize our life; how often it causes us to shut ourselves away from the world and the brokenness we see there, away from the way we are called to love one another and the other. The second type of fear when in Hebrew is often translated as awe. It is the fear when we are brought into contact with something utterly beyond our full comprehension. Norah occurs when we are brought face to face with the holy. When Joseph first learned about Mary's bearing a child before they had become intimate, I imagine he was full of those fears that might be called pachad. He feared what people in his village would say. He feared he would not follow correctly the Law he had been taught. He feared what would become of Mary. He feared what would become of the baby. He feared what would become of his own life now that his neatly laid out plan had been overturned. He feared this knuckleball which had been thrown in his life. He feared. And then in his dream Joseph is brought before an angel of the Lord and he experienced a fear he had never known; an awe that comes with divine contact; a revelation so beyond what he had experienced before that other concerns no longer seemed so large. Joseph is told not to fear this surprise pregnancy, not to fear what people may say or think, not to fear the rules laid out in Deuteronomy. Joseph is told not to fear the knuckleball

that has been thrown into his life. He is told that this major disruption to all of the plans he had made is actually a part of God's larger plan. The words spoken so long ago by Isaiah so long ago are coming to pass: "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel". In response to the fearful awe he experienced in his contact with the divine through the angel in his dream, Joseph lays aside his pashad, phantom fears, lays aside his previous understanding of God's law that he may be part of welcoming Emmanuel, God is with us, into the world. The Holy Spirit and Mary may provide us with the first miracle in the gospels, but I think that Joseph's actions are a pretty miraculous response to that first miracle. I would guess that as a carpenter, Joseph would have constructed his life very carefully, always measuring twice and cutting once. He had sought to follow in the strong tradition of the law he had received as a gift. But the knuckleball thrown into his life left him with two very different choices. He could ignore the angel's words in his dream. He could stick with his previous notions of both how he had always understood how God worked and how his life worked. He could stay afraid of anything that threatened his understanding of the world and himself. Or, he could let his awe for the presence of God found in the angel stronger than his fear of the knuckleball. We know the choice that Joseph made. It seems that when we set up our nativity scene at this time of year, we often don't pay enough attention to the role of Joseph in this story. We fail to see how his participation was also essential in the working out of God's plan. When Joseph chose to take the leap of faith that the knuckleball that landed in his life was thrown by God, he just as much as Mary chose to be God's faithful servant. He chose to step forward and claim his role, just as he claimed Mary and the child. On this fourth Sunday in Advent we once again stand poised to welcome the in-breaking of God into our midst. We also find ourselves close to a new calendar year. In the year to come, as in the year that is drawing to a close, there will be knuckleballs. There will be disruptions to our carefully crafted plans. There will be unexpected challenges. In the midst of all that, we will have a choice. We may allow our pashad fears to shake us. Or we may choose to recognize the power of God's love being born into this world and seek how we may serve faithfully in the midst of it all. May our awe of that divine presence in our midst stand stronger than any fears we may possess and may we become strong in the process. For God is indeed coming "and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.