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## RAISING A CHILD NOT YOUR OWN

*When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

*(Matthew 1:18-21)*

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## RAISING A CHILD NOT YOUR OWN

Centuries ago there was a follower of Jesus who lived in Asia Minor—what today is Turkey. He had a heart for those in need; he was selfless and kind. According to one legend, as he approached Christmas he wanted to find a way to celebrate rightly the birth of the One who gave himself for the world. After some reflection, he settled on an idea: Find needy children in his community and do something to help them. In this he would follow the tradition of the magi, who had brought gifts to help Joseph's poor family that first Christmas. You may not know the story, but you know the name: Nicholas, who eventually became a bishop in the church and after his death was canonized as St. Nicholas.

In a time when we struggle to buy gifts for people who don't need anything, and when our children or grandchildren are often exhausted or bored by the end of Christmas, having opened so many gifts, it's important to remember the example of St. Nicholas, the inspiration behind our gift exchanges. Perhaps as we celebrate Christmas, we need to reclaim his emphasis on giving to children who are not our own, children who are most in need.

In a real way, that's what this chapter is about. Joseph chose to care for, protect, and raise a child who was not his own. In this chapter we'll look at how Joseph shaped the life and ministry of Jesus, and what that story tells us not only about this humble carpenter but about God and ourselves.

A quick recap of where we are in the story: Mary informed Joseph that, though they were engaged, she was pregnant and the child was not his. She told him that an angel had told her she was going to conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, without ever having been with a man. Joseph, doubting this far-fetched explanation of Mary's pregnancy, planned quietly to call off the marriage. When he did so, others would assume he was responsible for the pregnancy and for the divorce that would follow. He would be dishonored, and Mary largely would retain her honor.

That night, after hearing Mary's news, Joseph experienced what was undoubtedly a fitful sleep. And as he slept, Joseph had a dream. In it, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, announcing that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because the child conceived in her womb was of the Holy Spirit, just as Mary had said. It is to this part of the story we now turn.

### Angels

Let's begin with Matthew's account of the angel who came to Joseph in a dream. As mentioned previously, our English word *angel* is a transliteration of the Greek word *angelos*, which simply means "messenger."

We often think of angels as winged creatures, but when you read the Bible closely, that is not how they are portrayed. It is true that Scripture describes some heavenly creatures as having wings. In Isaiah 6:2, for example, Isaiah saw a group of seraphim in the temple that had six wings each. One pair of wings covered the eyes, another pair were on the feet, and the third pair were for flying. Elsewhere the Bible describes cherubim. These make us think of cherubs, with the pudgy little faces that we associate with Valentine's Day. The cherubim in the Bible have four faces. Cherubim and seraphim are not angels, but it may be from them that we get the mistaken idea that angels have wings.

Most often in the Bible, we find that angels simply look like people. Hence, the writer of Hebrews wrote to first-century Christians, "Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). The fact that we might entertain or host angels without knowing it would tell us that angels most often look like ordinary people. In the book that bears his name, Daniel speaks to the angel Gabriel and refers to him as "the man." In Luke's Gospel, when Mary speaks to Gabriel, he appears simply as a stranger, with no wings.

In Matthew's Gospel, the angel speaks to Joseph through his dreams. It happens four times. In the first dream, the angel of the Lord reveals that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and describes the child's destiny. In the second dream, an angel tells Joseph to take his family to Egypt to save the child. In the third dream, when Joseph and the Holy Family are in Egypt, he receives word from the angel of the Lord that it is safe to take his family to Mary's hometown of Nazareth. And in the fourth dream Joseph is warned not to return to Judea.

In Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary face-to-face. Why doesn't the same happen with Joseph? Why does the angel appear to Joseph only in a dream?

We can't be certain of the answer, but here's what I think. In order to see angels, I think you have to have a bit of an imagination, an openness to a different way of seeing. You have to be able to perceive something that others might not be able to see.

Did Joseph have this ability? Maybe not. Joseph was a craftsman. He worked with tools and materials to build things. Like many men, I suspect he was better at seeing how a piece of wood might become a farm implement than seeing angels in his midst. He may have said that angels were not logical. Those practical ways of thinking may impede one's ability to see angels. It seems possible that the only way God could break through to Joseph was in a dream, when Joseph's rational way of thinking was suspended. Perhaps that's why Joseph met the angel of the Lord in his dreams.

### **Seeing an Angel, and Being One**

A woman in the congregation I serve recently told me that she and others had seen angels just after her son's death; they appeared at the gravesite. When I asked what they looked like, she said they had wings and "looked like clouds." I'll admit, the rational side of me was a bit skeptical. I asked, "Did everyone with you see the angels?" No, she said, just a few.

Another woman recently told me about her vision of angels. She and her husband had driven to St. Jude's Hospital, a place they had never visited before. She said, "I saw what looked like white sheets that were just blowing in the wind, hovering over the building." She recognized them as angels. Her husband did not see them. White sheets or angels? I don't discount that these people saw angels. I suspect that an angel might appear in whatever way someone needs them to appear in order to convey God's message.

I've never seen an angel, at least not the winged kind that flitter overhead. But once, I ran out of gas on a terribly cold and snowy day, ten miles from the nearest gas station. A guy named Jeff stopped to help. He had seen my car by the side of the road, and then he had seen me walking in the snow in the direction of a gas station. So he invited me to hop into his pickup truck. He took me to a gas station, where I bought a two-gallon gasoline can and filled it up. He waited patiently and then took me back to my car. I got out my billfold and was going to give him fifty dollars for stopping to help, but he refused. He said, "This was a blessing for me. If you give me money, you'll rob me of the blessing." So I thanked him profusely, and he drove away. I've never seen him again.

Sometimes when I think of angels, I think of Jeff. Perhaps God sent Jeff as his way of looking out for me. Most often the angels God sends today have names such as yours. These angels come to offer a word of encouragement or guidance, or to offer a bit of tangible help. Sometimes, like Joseph's angel, they help us know God's will and then help us find the courage to do it.

Recently, one of our church members told me about her experience with angels. She and her husband were in a terrible car accident more than twenty years ago, an accident that would claim his life. She was able to get out of the vehicle, but her husband was trapped inside the car. While she stood there crying, waiting for help, a car carrying three teenage girls stopped. The girls stood by her side for an hour as the police tried to extricate her husband from the vehicle. He died on the scene. But she told me she would never forget how those three teenage girls who had never met her before simply stood with her at the side of the road through the terrible ordeal.

I wonder, have you ever met this kind of angel? Or maybe, more importantly, have you ever been one of these angels for someone else, perhaps a complete stranger who was in need? Maybe you saw someone who had run out of gas or who had been in an accident. Maybe you met someone who needed a word of

encouragement, so you offered it. Maybe God used you as an angel without your even realizing it.

Those of you reading this book during Advent may know that the third Sunday in Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for “rejoice,” and the Sunday of this week is known as Joy Sunday. Those using Advent candle wreaths may recognize that the color for this week’s candle is pink, a symbol of joy. This weekend foreshadows the joy Christians sing about on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning as they join together in Isaac Watts’s famous carol “Joy to the World.”

Sadly, the season leading up to Christmas is often anything but joyful. We may sing of joy, but we don’t necessarily feel it. Beyond all the chaos of our preparations for Christmas, all the tasks to be done in a finite amount of time, what often makes this season feel so joyless is this: In our minds we have an idealized picture of Christmas, and it doesn’t always match our real-life experience. Life for us doesn’t look like a Norman Rockwell painting. (The first Christmas didn’t look like a Norman Rockwell painting either.) In fact, depending on what’s happening in our lives at the time, Christmas can be really depressing.

So, where do we look for joy during Advent and Christmas when it seems to be missing in our lives? We can find it in being an angel for someone else. We experience joy when we take our eyes off our own situation and focus on blessing, building up, encouraging, or serving others. After Jeff helped me on that snowy day when I ran out of gas, I felt deeply grateful. But in stopping to help me, I’m pretty sure Jeff felt real joy. When we take our eyes off ourselves and focus on someone else, we open ourselves to a different way of seeing and being. We become someone’s angel, a messenger of God’s good news, a gift during a time of need.

When was the last time you were someone’s angel?

### Completing the Story

Any Jew who heard Matthew’s account of Joseph’s dreams instantly would have thought of another Joseph in Scripture—the favorite son of Jacob (Israel), who lived at least sixteen hundred years before the birth of Jesus. If you’ve not read his story in Genesis you may have seen a version of it on stage in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. You’ll remember that the earlier Joseph was also a man who heard from God in his dreams. Matthew often draws parallels between the life of Jesus and stories and figures from the Old

Testament, and it seems likely he intended for us to see that earlier Joseph as a kind of type or picture of how God was at work in the dreams of Joseph the carpenter.

Frequently Matthew quotes Old Testament Scripture, using words such as these: "Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled..." (Matthew 1:22). Sometimes we mistakenly read Matthew's words to mean that the Old Testament texts quoted were predictive prophecies being fulfilled in Jesus. The Greek word for *fulfilled* also means "completed," and it is this sense of the word that Matthew wants us to understand. He and other New Testament authors clearly saw Jesus as completing the prophets' words, or bringing a new and deeper fulfillment of them. Jesus represented a fuller, more complete expression of the Old Testament story—a story of God rescuing his people and showing them how to live in harmony with God and one another.\*

\* Scholars note that among the important ways in which Matthew portrays Jesus, he points to Jesus as one like, but greater than, Moses. For example, there are five sections in Matthew's Gospel, corresponding to the five books of Moses. And just as Moses received the Law and brought it to the people from a mountain, Matthew shows Jesus delivering God's new law from a mountain (in the Sermon on the Mount). At one point in Matthew, Jesus even goes onto a mountain and meets with Moses (and Elijah). There are many other parallels as well.

In addition, Matthew wants us to see that Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, heard from God in dreams—just as Joseph, the Old Testament patriarch, heard from God in dreams. To make the parallel even stronger, just as the father of Joseph the patriarch was named Jacob, so Matthew notes that the father of Joseph the carpenter was named Jacob (Matthew 1:16).

### Don't Be Afraid

Returning to the dream of Joseph the carpenter, we read that the angel told him:

*"Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

(Matthew 1:20-21)

I find it interesting that, after calling Joseph's name, the first words the angel speaks to Joseph are "Don't be afraid." Imagine that as a conversation starter!

I think about the times when I'm talking with my wife, LaVon, and the first thing I tell her is, "Don't be mad, but..." It's a cue that whatever I tell her next will give her good reason to be mad.

Joseph probably got that same feeling of apprehension when the angel began with “Don’t be afraid.” When God calls you to do something and the opening words are “Don’t be afraid,” you likely *should* be afraid! Whatever follows is sure to be outside your comfort zone. It may be a call filled with challenge and risk. In fact, sometimes God will call us to do the thing we absolutely do not want to do.

I’ve never seen an angel in a dream, but other kinds of angels have occasionally called me to do things I really didn’t want to do.

Nancy Brown is one of those angels. She is a dynamo of a woman, twenty-three years my senior, who nearly broke my arm twisting it. Nancy told me that I needed to go with her to Africa to see what God was doing through the Methodist churches there. She hoped that if I saw it with my own eyes, I’d be as moved as she was and would come back to the States willing to do all I could to support God’s work in Malawi, Zambia, and South Africa.

I’m not sure I was afraid, but I certainly dreaded the twenty-two hours of airplane rides and four hours of bus rides to reach a place I’d never been before, meeting people I’d never met and eating food I’d never eaten. But by the time we had finished, after seeing what could be

done in partnership and hearing an invitation to serve with our new friends, I came back to the United States deeply inspired. I’ve had the satisfaction of returning to Africa several times since. The angels that call me to do things I don’t want to do, things that I may dread, things that I end up doing joyfully—those angels usually look a lot like Nancy Brown and others in the congregation I serve.

Why did the angel tell Joseph not to be afraid? It wasn’t that Joseph might fear the angel itself. The message really was this: “Don’t be afraid of this mission to take Mary as your wife and to raise this child as your own.” The challenge of doing so must have made this humble carpenter anxious or fearful. He was being given a mission to wed Mary and to trust that the child was of God and not of another man. But more than that, Joseph was being presented with a mission of raising this child who “will save his people from their sins.” Don’t be afraid, Joseph. God’s saving plans for the world are being entrusted to your care!

“Don’t be afraid” is one of the most often recorded statements by God in the Bible. That God so frequently has to tell us not to be afraid is, once again, a reminder that God’s calling is not for the faint of heart.



God called Moses back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and demand that he release the Israelite slaves. You may recall the reaction of Moses, who was eighty years old at the time. He said, basically, "Are you kidding me?" (His actual words were "Please send someone else!")

We are a bit like Moses. It's our nature to make excuses and raise objections when called to do something we don't want to do. But what God called Moses to wasn't just any task; it was saving an entire nation.

Likewise, what God asked of Joseph was no ordinary or small thing: he was to raise, protect, and nurture God's son, so that the Messiah could grow up and save his people. It was as if the entirety of Moses' life, and Joseph's, had been preparing them for this moment, when God would call them to play a key part in God's saving story. Yes, it was scary. It was downright terrifying. And yet it was a mission that would change the world.

Have you ever felt God calling you to do something that scared you just a little bit? If not, perhaps you haven't been paying attention. If you have heard God's call and responded with a leap of faith that took you beyond your comfort zone, then you've probably discovered something important: Trusting God despite our fears, saying yes to God's call even when we feel like saying no, ultimately brings us joy. It's the kind of joy we celebrate on Joy Sunday in Advent.

I know a woman whose initial reaction to anything uncomfortable or unnerving is to say no. It's a kind of default response that comes from fear. She tends to see all the things that could go wrong, or all the ways she isn't equipped or the right person for the job. One thing I admire about her, though, is that her initial response is usually not her final response. The Holy Spirit continues to work on her, and eventually her fear gives way to faith, her no becomes a yes, and God uses her to do amazing things.

We all have a thousand excellent excuses to avoid what God is calling us to do, but it's in saying yes that life's adventures are found! I think of those who tutor kids in low-income neighborhoods where they've never been before. And those who decide to start giving 10 percent or more of their income, who worry at first but then enter into a lifestyle of trust and extravagant giving. And those in our congregation who have answered the call to ordained ministry. And those who volunteer in prison ministry. And all those who, in some form or another, give a hesitant yes when they want to say no. There's a bit of anxiety in each of these cases.

For me, there was more than a bit of anxiety when I received a phone call in 1990 with word that Bishop W. T. Handy was assigning me to start a new church for people who didn't go to church. He said the assignment

involved just a few problems: There was no land and no place for the congregation to meet, there was no money, and there were no people. I was excited, and at the same time I was terrified.

God says over and over in Scripture, in essence: "Don't be afraid! Don't surrender to your fears! I've got something important for you to do. And I'm going to do something great, if only you will put one foot in front of the other."

Every great thing you'll ever be called by God to do will require an element of risk. It will require you to take a leap of faith. It will require you to do something that involves uncertainty, and all you'll have to lean on is the faith that God has called you. These ventures will require you to become vulnerable and to risk getting it wrong, falling flat on your face, making a fool of yourself, or being made the fool by someone else. And yet: "Don't be afraid," the angel of the Lord said to Joseph in that dream.

When was the last time you felt God calling you to do something that made you anxious or afraid? When was the last time you said yes to that call when you really felt like saying no?

On Joy Sunday or any other day, my hope is that you will remind yourself that almost all your most exciting, life-giving, and joy-filled experiences have come because

you took a risk, stepped outside your comfort zone, and said yes to God's call in spite of your fears. Remember what the angel told Joseph: "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

### **Raising a Child Not Your Own**

One of the most challenging and frightening parts of Joseph's call was the enormous task that God entrusted to Joseph. The messenger of God told him that the child Mary was carrying would be very important indeed: he would be the savior of his people, and Joseph would assume responsibility for him. Some call Joseph an adoptive father, because for all intents and purposes he did adopt and raise Jesus as his own. Some see him as a stepfather, since he was Jesus' father by marriage. Some might even call him a foster father.

The mission given to Joseph was to raise this boy as though he were Joseph's own. It was to love him, mentor him, teach him, and guide him. It was to model for this child what it meant to be a man—a man who honored and served God. Jesus was not Joseph's child by birth, but the boy would need Joseph to love him as his own.

Listen carefully: God's plan for the redemption of the world depended on one man's willingness to raise a child who was not his own.

There are stepparents and adoptive parents and foster parents who understand this role as a mission; they know from the beginning that it will be hard work. They take on a call that can be frightening. And to them, too, God says, "Don't be afraid."

As I was working on this book, I spoke with a member of our church staff, Frank Gentile, one of the greatest people I've ever known, about his experience of becoming a stepfather. His comments capture dimensions of the mission that Joseph was taking on. Frank helped me see Jesus' earthly father with fresh eyes.

I met my wife Yvonne on vacation. I went out on a date with her. She had two children from a previous marriage. And so for us it was not just dating, getting to know each other personally. I was also getting to know the kids. When you're in a relationship with somebody that's just single, it's really all about you and that individual. But when you're thrust into a situation where there are kids present already, a lot of things hit your mind. One of my fears was: Would I be seen by the children as a father figure or not? Would we be just kind of friends? The words that any stepfather dreads are, "Well, you're not my father."

As we progressed toward marriage I explained to the kids that it had to be a package deal. It couldn't be just about my relationship with their mom; it had to be about the kids as well. I think about what Joseph must have gone through. You know, that's not his natural-born child, but that kid still needs a father. I think that feeling of responsibility sometimes could be such a weight. It's like you and that kid against the world. And you feel that you've been endowed with a certain sense of "I've gotta be the one who helps this person get through life. And on the way I've gotta figure it out for myself, too." When I think about my own kids, I hope that I'm passing on to them a love for other people, and that that's one of the highest callings that you could have.

Many of you reading this book are stepmoms or stepdads. Some of you are adoptive mothers or adoptive fathers. Some have served as foster parents. Yours is a challenging but high calling. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes you give of yourself but the love is not reciprocated. I have described Joseph as the patron saint of doubters. I would suggest that he is also the patron saint of foster parents, stepparents, and adoptive parents.

Perhaps nowhere is the selfless, sacrificial love of God more clearly displayed than when someone takes on the

task of raising and loving a child who is not biologically theirs. They didn't have to take the job, they had a choice, but they chose to set aside their fears and accept the calling to be a stepparent, foster parent, or adoptive parent.

I have a stepmom, and I had a stepdad until his death a couple of years ago. I know that being a stepparent is a hard gig. You take on the role of being a parent for someone who doesn't necessarily want to see you in that role. Sometimes, kids hold on to a dream that, one day, their mom and dad will marry again. As a stepparent, you stand in the way of that dream becoming reality. It's hard enough to get along with your parents during your teenage years; it's even harder when you're dealing with someone who's not biologically your parent. It can create great conflict, and it can mean that the stepparent or foster parent ends up absorbing injury and pain. In a way, that's the job that Joseph signed up for.

In his epistle, James writes these well-known words: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27 NRSV). In the first century, widows, divorced women, and single mothers, along with their children and the children who had no parents, were the most vulnerable members of society. Again and again

the Scriptures call us to care for widows and orphans. Jesus wasn't an orphan, but he did need an earthly father.

At the Church of the Resurrection, we have a ministry called A Child's Hope. It focuses on foster and adoptive care: raising up, training, and supporting people who open their homes to foster children, and supporting those who are contemplating adoption. There are currently over four hundred thousand children in the U.S. who are in the foster system at any one time.<sup>1</sup> Not every foster home is a loving and caring environment, though many are.

For the most part, foster children are not babies, because babies are the ones for whom it's easiest to find permanent adoptive homes. Foster kids are older. Some are in high school. When they don't have a loving family environment and they "age out" of the system, many will struggle. One survey suggests that almost 37 percent of foster kids who aged out of the system have experienced some form of homelessness.<sup>2</sup> But when loving foster parents step up, they can have a huge impact. In the process, they are following the example that Joseph set.

In a similar way, those adopting children can have an impact that is nearly incalculable. Adoption is not an easy path. There can be challenges and at times pain. But adopting a child who needs a family can change

the world for that young person. I've watched dozens of families heroically raise and care for adopted children. At times it's quite difficult. But the trajectory of these kids' lives is forever changed because of sacrifices made and love given by their adoptive parents.

Not all of us are in a position to become foster or adoptive parents. All of us, though, are called to act in the spirit of Joseph and help care for and build up children who are not our own.

When you think about it, we all perform this work in our own particular ways. Some teach Sunday school, passing along spiritual values to the children of others. Some coach. Some volunteer as tutors, Big Brothers, or Big Sisters. These roles can be critical, because when children reach their middle school or high school years, they don't always listen to their parents' views. Sometimes the only person who can break through to them is a Sunday school teacher or youth group mentor, a Scout leader or coach on their sports team. There are millions of children who need caring adults to mentor them, listen to them, and offer them positive role models. All of us are called. Each of us can make a difference.

Christmas takes on real significance when we move beyond buying gifts for people who don't need anything to becoming modern-day Josephs and looking for ways to care for children who need our support.

At Church of the Resurrection, the Christmas Eve candlelight service is the best-attended worship service each year. Following the lead of Ginghamburg Church in Ohio, some years ago we began giving away the entire Christmas Eve offering to projects benefiting children in poverty. Half goes to support projects in developing countries, many of which are focused on orphans; the other half stays in the Kansas City area and is focused on improving the quality of life for low-income children. We do more than give money. We look at ways we can give our time to invest in these children, both in our city and abroad.

Mike Slaughter, pastor emeritus at Ginghamburg, regularly reminds his congregation, "Christmas is not your birthday." Maybe that's a lesson we need to learn for ourselves and teach our kids. We spend a lot of time and money buying things for people who don't really need them. But we celebrate Christmas in the right spirit when we care for children in need, just as St. Nicholas did, just as the wise men did, and just as Joseph did when he looked past his fear, took Mary as his wife, and raised Jesus as his own son.

*Lord, how grateful we are for Joseph's story. Please help us hear your call on our lives and become the instruments*

through which you bless others. Help us not to be afraid when you call us to do something that calls for a risk or challenge. Give us the courage to step outside our comfort zone and take a leap of faith. Finally, Lord, help us to feel responsible for children who are not our own and to experience the joy that comes in helping them. In Jesus' name. Amen.