

American journalist and writer, P. J. O'Rourke, once said, "Family love is messy, clinging, and of an annoying and repetitive pattern, like bad wallpaper." I agree with him - family love is messy and life is messy. And, the Bible has it all as various stories speak the truth about the messiness in which we live, the messiness that creates all sorts of systemic problems within families and communities, the messiness that prevents us from living in relationship with others, the messiness **everyone** experiences in some form. And, when looking at the messiness in our own lives, our reaction or lack of response to the messiness is usually rooted in some aspect of fear.

In today's gospel reading, we meet up with Joseph as we hear Matthew's version of Jesus' birth. While the gospel of Luke focuses on Mary, Matthew focuses on Joseph. And guess what? Joseph faces a really messy situation! Matthew does not give us the sweet, saccharine stories of angels and shepherds and a baby born in a cattle stall. No. Matthew focuses on Joseph and the heart wrenching struggle **he** was facing. The woman to whom he is engaged, the woman to whom he is contractually espoused, is pregnant. Mary and Joseph have not yet moved in with each other, they have not yet had sex, and Joseph faces heartache and a very messy problem. Mary is pregnant and this could only mean one

thing, she has been unfaithful. Can you imagine the emotions Joseph must have had when he heard this news? Anger, shock, hurt, disappointment, betrayal, **fear** and a need to distance himself from the mess.

Yet, as Matthew describes Joseph and the situation in which he finds himself, Matthew calls Joseph “righteous.” Now, to be righteous, according to Torah, is to be law abiding. And, as a law abiding Jew, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death. After all, stoning was the punishment commanded in the twenty-first chapter of Deuteronomy for engaged women who slept with other men. But, Matthew also tells us Joseph was a man of compassion. So, instead of stoning, Joseph decided he would quietly dismiss Mary as his wife. A quiet dismissal would hopefully minimize the public disgrace she would have to face. However, what **never** occurred to Joseph in the depth of the mess was that there is yet another way to be righteous - the way of acceptance and forgiveness and grace. Joseph, all on his own, couldn't imagine how God could be present in so difficult, so utterly messy, so heartbreaking, so embarrassing and so dangerous a situation as Mary's pregnancy. Therefore, God had to help him.

Joseph was **afraid**. He was **afraid** to take Mary as his wife. The gospel writer tells us that, in the deep darkness of sleep, God came to

Joseph in a dream. An angel of the Lord spoke to him saying, “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, for he will save his people from their sins.” God brought truth, grace and love into the irrational depths and quandary of Joseph's mind and being. In ways deeper and more magnificent than the mind can imagine, God **changed** Joseph. And because God changed Joseph, Joseph became a channel of God's grace in the world.

In the depth of the messiness of life, in the mire and sludge of the unexpected and unexplainable, in that which Joseph perceived as betrayal, in the overwhelming darkness of an experience that created fear – it is in **that** place that Joseph finds God present to him. God penetrated the darkness and fear **within** Joseph, and that experience of God led Joseph to take Mary as his wife and name the child “Jesus” which means “**God saves.**”

Now, Matthew was writing to a Jewish Christian audience, people who intimately knew Jewish scripture. So, the gospel writer connects Joseph's experience to the words of the prophet Isaiah saying,

“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and **they** shall name him Immanuel.” (Hebrew for “God with us”).

The truth about the Isaiah passage we read earlier today is that when Isaiah spoke these words to King Ahaz, the king was not very hopeful. When invited by the prophet Isaiah to “ask a sign” of God, Ahaz was not interested. In fact, Ahaz said, “I will not ask,” because Ahaz was resigned to defeat at the hand of the conquering Assyrians. However, Isaiah – good prophet that he was – was persistent. He pointed to the perennial sign of hope and new life for all people in any time saying, “a young woman will conceive and bear a son.” The truth about Isaiah’s words to Ahaz is that the baby of which **he** was speaking was already in utero. We are not told who the mother of **that** baby was. But, because a newborn child is always the promise of hope, even in hard times, Isaiah names the child as a sign of God’s presence: Immanuel God with us.

Immanuel, God with us! These are powerful words packed full of meaning and, centuries after Isaiah, Matthew connects these words to Jesus’ birth. These words gave Jesus identity and, as theologian Daniel Patte suggests, they do not simply describe Jesus. No, these words “Immanuel, God with us” were part of Jesus’ vocation. Jesus’ calling **was** and **is** to manifest God’s presence in people’s lives and save people from their sins.

It is so very interesting that nowhere else in scripture do we find Jesus called “Immanuel.” And what is even more interesting, as the writer of Matthew points out, is that Immanuel is not the name Joseph will give the child, but the name **others** will give the child. Others will call him Immanuel because of what he does, saving the people from their sins.

Joseph discovered that the presence of God in the depth of the mess **drives out fear**. God’s presence moved him beyond fear. Joseph discovered that the experience of God’s presence brings forgiveness. And, he discovered God’s presence brings change – change within self, change within the mess, and change to the world as he perceived it to be.

We live in a world that is notorious for crushing hope. We live in a world that is notorious for turning love into a stingy commodity as if there is not enough to go around. We live in a world where we participate in creating systemic messes - messes in our lives, messes in our families, messes in our communities, monumental messes in our country and colossal messes in the world. So, I ask you, what are the messes in which you live? Listen to the voice of God’s presence in your life, the voice that will penetrate the darkness of any situation, the voice that always says, “Do not be afraid.” Listen to the voice that says, “You are loved and your sins are forgiven.”

Christmas is all about God's presence to us, Immanuel God with us. Christmas is all about incarnation. Christmas is about the love and grace of God that is on the way, the love that is in fact already here!! Christmas is all about God putting skin on God's dream for the world – about God's dream becoming flesh in this very broken, messy world. Christmas is God's invitation to each one of us to experience within ourselves the love that forgives sin and the love that comes to bring healing to the world. And, it is **only** the presence of Immanuel, God with us, that transforms the systemic, predictable, messy patterns of living and enables us to live into the dream of God where **all** things are made new. Yes, love **is** on the way and the Child **will** be born again in us, in the depth of our neediness, in our hurting and pain, and in our deep longing for him. Do not be afraid because the hopes and fears of **all** the years are met in this One, Immanuel, God with us – this One who is on the way!