

American political satirist and journalist, 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 very messy, and the messy, dysfunctional aspects of family life too often become systemic, passed down through generations. Quite honestly, life is very messy. And the Bible is brutally honest about this messiness in our lives as it contains stories of all kinds of people in the depth of messiness and dysfunction. One of the beautiful aspects of scripture is that it speaks the truth about **our** very lives, the truth about 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 it is so fascinating that when looking at the messiness in our own lives, our **reaction** to it or our inability to thoughtfully respond in a **healthy** manner 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, the gospel of Matthew focuses on Joseph. And guess what? Joseph faces a **very** messy situation! Matthew does **not** give us the sweet, saccharine, syrupy, **heart-warming** 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 Joseph is engaged, the woman to whom he is already **contractually** espoused, is pregnant. Mary and Joseph have not yet moved in with each other, they have not yet had sex, and Joseph experiences extreme heartache as he faces 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, one must **strictly** follow the law. Therefore, as a good law-abiding Jew, Joseph **could** have had Mary stoned to death. After all, stoning was the punishment commanded in chapter twenty-two 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 Mary, Joseph decided he would quietly **dismiss** her as his wife. A quiet dismissal would hopefully minimize the public disgrace she would have to face. It is fascinating that, in the depth of his fear and the messiness, what

never occurred to Joseph 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 possibly 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, forgiveness, and love** into the irrational depths and quandary of Joseph's mind, heart and being. In ways deeper and more magnificent than the mind can possibly 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 – yes, in **that** place, Joseph finds God present to him. God penetrated the darkness

and the 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, the words we heard in our first reading today. The prophet says:

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

The truth about this Isaiah passage 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.” You see, Ahaz was living in **fear** and he was sure he would be defeated 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' very vocation. Jesus' calling **was** and **is** to manifest and make known God's presence in people's lives and save people from their sins. Jesus' calling then and now, is to manifest and make know God's presence to **us** in the depth of **our** fear and the messiness of **our** lives.

Joseph discovered that the presence of God in the depth of the messiness of life **drives out fear**. God's presence moved him **beyond** fear. Joseph **also** 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 always 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 the depth of our messiness, in our hurting and in our pain, and in our deep longing for God. 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, in fact, already here!