

We are nearly there, Christmas is right around the corner, and so this morning we heard how it all happened, from the perspective not of Mary but of Joseph.

I feel sorry for Joseph. I think this must have been the most bewildering time.

He is engaged to marry Mary. In that time engagement was as serious a covenant as actual marriage. You did not get engaged lightly, nor did you break off an engagement lightly. Joseph was looking forward to his wedding and to living with *Mary when suddenly it turns out that she's pregnant! And he knows it wasn't his. It must have felt like a slap in the face. Not only was his beautiful bride someone he really didn't know, but now he had to face the disgrace of a failed engagement.

What was a man to do?

A woman's infidelity was considered so shocking that the penalty given in Deuteronomy was death by stoning, but we don't know that that was actually carried out in Joseph's time. It is more probable that a public shaming would have happened that would have made Mary a pariah, someone who no-one wanted to know, and it would have brought disgrace on her whole family. Since their society was based on a system of honor, this would be like going through a massive and public bankruptcy. No-one would want to do business with them again.

I can imagine Joseph worrying and worrying about this. How was he to avoid being a laughing stock himself – the man who couldn't even keep his fiancée interested? If he blamed and shamed Mary it would take the attention away from him. But then it would be an awful thing for her and for her family, and he still loved her.

What was a man to do?

Now Joseph was not only a direct descendant of David but also a "righteous man." He decided not to publicly shame Mary for her

infidelity but to break things off as quietly as possible. But before he told her, something happened that changed everything.

He had a dream.

And in his dream, an angel of the Lord appeared and told him, “Do not be afraid!” The same words the angel Gabriel said to Mary. “Do not be afraid!” “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

That is seriously confusing – whoever heard of such a thing? A child from the Holy Spirit?

I wonder whether Mary and Joseph talked about the angels. I wonder whether they compared what they were being told by these other worldly beings, or whether Joseph acted independently. We don’t know but we heard that when he woke up he went ahead with the wedding as planned but didn’t have sexual relations with her until after the child was born.

One of my colleagues summed it up – order, disorder, reorder.

The original order was that Joseph was covenanted to marry Mary. Disorder happens when it is discovered that she is pregnant. Reorder happens when, following divine intervention, Joseph decides to go ahead with the marriage and the baby is born and named Jesus.

My friends, it seems that many of us are in one way or another, in the disorder phase. We are like Joseph once he learned that Mary is pregnant; his world was shaken, the order destroyed. My life is like that at present – I am making a pilgrimage toward retirement and I have no idea what that will contain but it changes what I am doing now in a way that I can hardly define; as a faith community we are together dealing with the same transition and added to that is the loss of a music director with the changes that may bring to our worship. The order we have been used to is being shaken. And beyond us the order we were used to in the

wider society has been shaken with the rise of autocracy, and the threat to democracy it brings about.

We are in disorder.

And it is not comfortable. Disorder is confusing and difficult.

I am reminded that transformation is not comfortable. When the caterpillar turns into a chrysalis and then into a butterfly it is not an immediate process, nor is it a certain one. If you break open one of those little crysalides you will not see a clean gradual process like a tadpole becoming a frog, no, you will just see a mess of green goo.¹ The caterpillar completely disintegrates into total disorder and a new being, a new order, emerges from the mess. The caterpillar did not choose to disintegrate, it just happened. It just happened as part of the natural process of growth.

Joseph did not choose to have his life thrown into total disorder and upheaval. It happened because God was coming among us in a new way. God was coming among us as Emmanuel – God with us and Jesus or in Hebrew Yeshua which means Yahweh saves. An entirely new order was coming into being, one foretold by the prophets but almost impossible to imagine.

Journalist and writer, Phyllis Tickle, pointed out that about every 500 years western society and the church go through a big upheaval when the strands of order seem to fray one by one until there is apparent chaos, but even in the chaos the new is being born. Out of the chaos of green goo comes something new, a new way of doing things. Out of the chaos of the Protestant Reformation five hundred years ago came the many Protestant churches we know today, including the Episcopal church. The reformation as not an overnight wonder, it lasted a long time. Many years and decades of chaos, confusion and disorder.

¹ Thank you to Kate Perry for this analogy.

You could call it a Joseph event. Except that it wasn't just Joseph was it? What about the chaos of the crucifixion when the hope of all the ages was extinguished by the treachery of the religious leaders and the power of the political system. Yeshua, Emmanuel, all the prophecies just destroyed.

I often wonder what happened when Jesus was in the tomb. He was taken in very dead on Friday afternoon, and sometime between then and Sunday morning he carefully folded up the cloth his body had been laid in, and left.

Did Jesus turn into green goo? How does resurrection happen?

My friends, we don't know. There is no certainty in disorder.

Except that there is. There is one underlying certainty, and that is God's love and God's love is always pulling us towards the highest possible flourishing in the situation within which we find ourselves. So we get to trust. We get to trust that green goo will transform into some kind of new being, probably a butterfly.

We get to trust that in the chaos of the upheaval of church and society, a new church is being born, a new church which will proclaim the love of God for a new generation. We get to trust that in the discomfort of leadership transition, a new order will emerge for St. Benedict's with new possibilities built solidly on the foundation of the past thirty plus years. We get to trust that in our own lives we will look back one day and see that God's order prevailed even when everything was confusing.

The prophet third Isaiah was writing at a time when Jewish people had returned from the known order of exile to the disorder of a ruined city and occupied land. He gave them vision and direction. In Isaiah 56 he tells them, "Maintain justice and do what is right for soon my salvation will come." This came up in my personal prayer life this week.

How do we walk through the green goo? “Maintain justice and do what is right.”

Isn't that what Joseph did? In deciding to end their engagement quietly, Joseph did the best he could to “maintain justice and do what is right” in the light of all that he knew right then. And then he got new information.

I doubt that it made things much clearer. I imagine that he still had a lot of doubt and confusion. His fiancée was pregnant and said it was the work of God. Really?

But he kept going. He chose to “maintain justice and do what is right” until things got clearer and so he married Mary and raised Jesus as if he were his own son, trusting the words of the angel, “Do not be afraid!”

And that my friends is the message of Advent, “Do not be afraid!” for God is coming, a new order is on its way. Transformation is happening in ways we can't even imagine.

This is how I phrased it for myself “Don't sweat the Green Goo, and It's all Green Goo”