

Matthew's Nativity narrative invites us to ponder the transforming miracle of incarnation. In a special way, God became what we are in the person of Jesus, so that eventually you and I could be transformed into what God is. From all outward appearances, the birth of Jesus looked the same as it does when any other incarnated spirit like you or me shows up.

The circumstances were quite different though, at many levels, and it's understandable that Joseph was disturbed at first. The angel convinced him that he was standing in the presence of the purest form of miracle, however, and when Joseph grasped that, everything became different, for in the presence of miracles things change and can never be the same again.

At first, as we heard, Joseph didn't pick up on it and decided to divorce Mary quietly. In doing that, he was protecting her from his only other option within the Mosaic Law, which was that a woman found with child outside of marriage was to be stoned to death at the doorstep of her father's house, because she had brought disgrace upon his family.

Notice carefully that even though Joseph didn't understand the miraculous nature of Mary's circumstances, he was a good man, like you, and decided to treat her compassionately even before the angel spoke to him. After the angel spoke to him, Joseph did something beyond being merely compassionate. By the power of God's transforming miracles unfolding within and around him, he experienced a change of heart and decided to do both something dangerous and unconventional, taking Mary as his wife, knowing full well what trouble for him would likely come along with that.

Joseph's experience tells us a lot about miracles. Miracles are God speaking to your heart and mine, transforming our religion from a set of beliefs we might think about from time to time to the foundation an entirely new way of being and acting; it's about doing everything with deep compassion as we become more and more fully aware of what it means to be the unique expressions of God's love that each of us was created to be.

Let me tell you a little story about how that transforming power of miracles plays out these days. A while ago a friend of mine told me about a time years before when he'd found out that his unmarried youngest daughter, away at college, was unexpectedly found to be with child.

“It was a tough time,” he said. ““I saw myself as a failure as a dad. I wondered whether my wife and I had missed something bringing her up; I was angry with her, too. Those were bitter times. My daughter knew how I felt and couldn't face me. She felt she'd disgraced the family. Fortunately, my wife kept it all together; she worked hard trying to get me to calm down.”

“I wasn't really hearing a bar of that song until the afternoon she called me and told me our daughter had been considering taking the baby's life and, my wife feared, maybe even her own. I remember that moment like it happened yesterday. Fortunately, my wife had convinced our daughter to call the right people, rushed up to the campus, and stayed with her until she knew she was safe. She asked me to join them the next day.”

“I went out for a walk along the river later that day and stopped by the dam. I remember looking at the rushing water, leaves and bubbles passing by, glistening in the fading sunlight and then going over the dam to disappear forever. Something changed inside me in that moment. I heard a whisper in my heart and suddenly I saw that absolutely everything in Creation, especially life itself, was so miraculous and infinitely precious.”

““Why had it been so easy for me not to notice that?” I wondered. “How had I not seen that my baby girl and her baby were miracles too, far more beautiful and precious than any leaf or bubble? It occurred to me that my whole response up till then had been all about me. How I looked; what people would say about me; how hard it might be for me to face friends and family. I'd been angry and afraid about the trouble that would likely come along for me.”

“Early the next day I drove up to my daughter’s place on campus. I knocked on the door and she opened it. Her immediate response was terror, but only for an instant. She saw the tears in my eyes and we ran into each other’s arms. I don’t think I’ve ever embraced anyone like that. I was holding my lovely daughter with her innocent little baby growing inside, safe, alive and sobbing in my arms. The thought struck me like a thunderbolt - what had either of them ever done to me? I asked her to forgive me and swore to her that we’d cherish her and her baby no matter what. Our Christmas that year was unforgettable. We all knew something about miracles and incarnation that we couldn’t ever have imagined before, and we understood with precision how it is that love is both a commandment and a gift.”

That story turns out to have an even happier ending than we have time here together to relate, but to me it’s so close in so many ways to the story of Joseph and Mary. The deep gift of God’s incarnation in Jesus is that through the prism of this very special miracle we can come to see that all Creation is utterly miraculous and infinitely precious; the miracle of our own life is not just about us and nothing can ever be taken for granted again. The world becomes vivid with significance, and open to love even in the midst of suffering and distress. This is the way in which sin will be taken from the world. Indeed, it can happen no other way.

As St. Joseph and my friend discovered, life gets messy and inconvenient from time to time; we may truly not understand. But that’s just the way miracles are. If you happen to be here with people you love, please turn to them right now and give them a gentle hug. If you’re alone, close your eyes and hug someone you love, living or deceased, in your heart. Either way, let the awareness arise within you as you do so that you are hugging nothing less than a very real miracle. Take some time this last week before Christmas to delight in, wonder about and cherish all the miracles that surround you and see behind them all, if you can, the colossal miracle of God’s love unfolding to embrace us all!