

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
September 7, 2025

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.
~Matthew 1:18-25

I always love this time of year in my Music History classes. For my survey of music that goes through the present day, we get to savor the most recent and intriguing developments in music. Right now, one trend is something called "recomposition," and it's peaking after gaining listeners for a few years now. Musicians take snippets from old compositions or ideas or patterns and bring them back to life using the vocabulary of more recent compositional approaches from across a wide range of genres. The result sounds something like this recomposed piano piece, which has now been streamed more than *four million* times. [Play a bit of Passacaglia] What's fun is that my other survey class winds up in the late Baroque with the music of Handel, and he's the one who wrote the original that in this case has been recomposed. [play phrase of Handel] And so with this development we get to savor dialogue across centuries, from 18th Century drawing rooms and concert halls to the myriad platforms that deliver music to us today. It's music in dialogical chorus, speaking or singing almost as one side of our choir does to the other, and back again.

I think of this today because of the rich dialogical chorus embedded within the passage from Matthew that we just heard as today's gospel reading. It was freshly composed in its time, yet boy is it rich with strains from the scripture and lore and history of generations past. If it was three centuries before Handel was reimagined, it's perhaps as many as twenty centuries between the two melodies that sing to each other in this gorgeous and action-packed passage. I was chatting with Kate and Emma a couple of weeks ago at coffee hour and I mentioned that this passage was coming up. They told me they'd be at home on Christmas break by now, but not before sharing their own enthusiasm for this passage and its portrait of one Joseph with very strong echoes of another. Emma remembered her middle-school days and her school's performance of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. We started humming all the songs. It's about the ancient Joseph, the Joseph who listened to dreams and followed God who managed to show mercy in very trying circumstances. . . a Joseph very much like the Joseph we heard about today.

It was great to chat with Emma and Kate because actually I'd been thinking about another dialogue entirely, hearing echoes of another great figure from the ancient past who heard the voice of God in burning bush, who listened to God, and in whose acts of obedience and love and

faithfulness God's work of salvation and liberation went forward. That's Moses, of course, and this passage today does indeed echo his story as well. Matthew endows his gospel with a rich melodic tapestry indeed, weaving motifs and strains across the centuries, allowing them to speak with each other and alongside each other very much as musicians do today with strains and peals and riffs from Vivaldi, Corelli, Handel and many more.

And so the question we ask ourselves of course is just why Matthew does this. The evangelists all had thousands of units to choose from — stories about Jesus, his sayings, his teachings — and they had to choose just those few they could accommodate in their brief accounts of Jesus's life. And Matthew alone chose this one. Why? What is it in the Joseph story that intrigued him the way Mary so captivated Luke? Why does Matthew so clearly want to cue these lovely and beloved melodies from generations past for those who would get to hear or read his gospel?

The first answer is the simplest: Matthew is writing to a community of Jewish folks, some of whom are Jesus-followers, and some of whom aren't. He's reaching out to those who aren't inside this new family yet, hoping to draw them in. And he's doing so by playing favorite old melodies and bringing back beloved old moments from Jewish scripture. How do we know his audience is Jewish? Well, he uses lots of esoteric Jewish terminology and he never bothers to explain it. That's one way we know — but we also know because *twelve times*, one for each tribe of Israel, he brings back beloved old prophecies from the great Jewish sages and shows how they've now been fulfilled in Jesus. And he does that here as well. *Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God with us.'* Yes. God with us then, God guiding and leading and liberating us then, and God with us now, leading and liberating in a new and wondrous way: God now dwelling among us as one of us, God now abiding among and even within us.

That's first. But second and I think most of all, Matthew chooses the Joseph stories *because of Joseph*. He wants us to see who Joseph is and how Joseph stands as one of scripture's great heroes. There are many ways in which this is true; in the few minutes we have I'll briefly highlight three.

First: Joseph was able to hear the angel. *Joseph was able to hear*. Joseph was open to the possibility that God might be speaking in this way. I have friends who are a married clergy couple and who work in the field of dreams. They've studied dreams and noted just how often God leads and guides through dreams. And they've come up with one principal takeaway: We should all be open not only to the chance but *to the likelihood* that God will speak to us, perhaps in a dream, perhaps in a bush, perhaps in a still, small voice, because that's what scripture tells us over and over. Be open to dreams, they say, and to all the ways in which God might be speaking and inviting us to hear and to carry forward God's work of liberation and salvation.

Second: Joseph knew what to listen to and what to silence. Joseph was able to silence the noise of the world, the voices that would have told him to dismiss Mary, to distance himself from her, to run from the thick shadow of shame that would soon descend over her. Joseph was able to silence this noise, this passing and limiting noise, and to listen instead for the enduring voice, the voice of steadfastness and love. And Matthew invites us to do the same, to turn down the passing barking of bullies and self-interested tyrants, those in our time who echo those from whom Joseph would need to flee with his infant son, to Egypt, as did Joseph before him, as did Moses before him, led by God, agents of God's work of liberation and love.

And finally: Joseph accomplished his work just as Joseph and Moses did before him and just as his son would do after him. He accomplished it in mercy, in forgiveness, in grace and graciousness, in breadth of vision, in love. That's the ultimate witness of Joseph, breathing love into a world filled with division, conflict, and darkness. Joseph re-echoes a melody just as he anticipates another: the melody of phrases and enlightenments and invitations that Matthew will present as a sermon on a mountain that calls and beckons and urges us to turn the other cheek when struck, to love our enemies, and thus — in this way alone — for our light to shine with ultimate radiance and break through the darkness, any darkness, in any generation.

Matthew's an interesting gospel, my friends. It's the one that shows us the message of salvation and redeeming love, whispered into ears by angels, shared in word and in acts of healing and love, and then handed off in the very last moment to us. That's where Matthew takes us: to the moment when all of this is handed off to us. And so we go into the world with this message, in acts of mercy, in lives of integrity, listening through it all for the voice of the one who led them and will lead us now and forevermore into the one light that continues to burn, the one light that will never be extinguished. Thanks be to God.