

## “Mary and Joseph”

Sermon on Sunday, December 10, 2023

Dear church,

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.” That’s how Mark invites us to read the oldest gospel. Sometimes we forget that the written gospel is just the beginning, not the end - a live document, a spiritual starter, an appetizer. It’s the beginning of something so big that it could never fit between the covers of a single book. For better or worse, all of us are involved in the gospel, the revelation of Jesus the Messiah - in our lives, in our homes, in our hearts, in our world.

This time of year, we are out there, shopping in-line and online, most of us buying too much. And yet, there are huge gifts that we won’t find under our Christmas trees, that we can’t buy anywhere. They are called peace, justice, love, reconciliation. Too big to fit under a tree. Too elusive to be gift-wrapped and given to someone on Christmas Day. And yet, these are the gifts that the gospel wants to convey: peace, justice, love, reconciliation. Ironically, sadly, the holidays are often a time when these gifts are least visible. Sure, charity skyrockets during this time, but so is crime; and happiness is part of the holidays; but so is depression and loneliness.

Every year, this season is an exercise in believing again, challenging the veracity of our so-called realism, our assumption that this world is headed for disaster. Every year, the Spirit beckons us to begin again with counter-narratives to the bad news around us, recognizing the other stories which are also true, filled with hope for this world, good news, the gospel. I found a story just like that last Wednesday when I ran into parishioners at dinner time. For simplicity’s sake, let’s just call them Bernie and Martha. I asked Bernie for permission to share the story. The main protagonists in this true story are, no joke, people named Mary and Joseph. It happened in our time. It happened in the United States. The Word became flesh.

Several years ago, a couple named Joseph and Mary were on their way to a wedding in Washington DC, driving north on Interstate 95 near Fayetteville, North Carolina when they witnessed an accident ahead of them. A rather intense rainstorm had caused another car to hydroplane into the side of another vehicle. Joseph pulled the car over onto the median to check on the occupants involved in the accident. At the same time, a truck driver hauling 8000 gallons of hydrofluoric acid came onto the scene and, due to the intensity of the rain, did not see that Joseph hadn’t pulled his car all the way off the road. He hit the back of the car driving it into a bridge abutment after which it exploded causing the death of Mary who was 84 years old. A tragic story.

Who was this modern-day couple Mary and Joseph? They had met during World War II at a USO dance, fell in love, got married and moved back to Fayetteville where they became involved in the Catholic Archdiocese. Every Sunday after Mass, the priests and nuns came to their home for brunch. They were beloved in the community and Mary's death shocked many. The lawyer for the family demanded \$45 million to settle the case.

The case was complicated by North Carolina Law, according to which the damages were to be multiplied by the number of children of the deceased. Mary and Joseph, good Catholics, had twelve children, one of them adopted. Negotiations went on, as usual over money. The insurance policy was capped at \$ 50 million, and the case had dragged on for four years. On the day on which the children were to begin testifying before the jury, a new lawyer that was brought in from Pennsylvania – initials B.H. – shared an unusual idea. I don't know whether an angel visited him that night, but it's possible. He felt that in this awful, tragic case with no obvious winners, there was an opportunity to provide something special and meaningful to Joseph and his family as well as to the truck driver, that no amount of money could buy. It had something to do with who they were, their faith, their religion, and their humanity.

The lawyer proposed providing medical care for Joseph for the rest of his life, fix and upgrade the organ in their beloved church, have one of the stained-glass windows dedicated to Mary, fund a college scholarship in Mary's name for children of the congregation, and through the purchase of annuities, build college funds for every one of the family's grandchildren. The opposing lawyer laughed. This would never work in a legal battle like that. His laughter got more intense after one more thing was added to the proposal. Settlement would be contingent upon the truck driver having the opportunity to offer his apologies to Joseph and the family, which is never part of the resolution of any lawsuit. But why not? For a man of deep religious faith like Joseph this might be important.

To make a long story short, the offer was accepted in less than an hour. After the paperwork was signed, it came time for the truck driver to offer his apologies. He walked up and, with humility, said "Mr. P., I don't hunt, and I don't fish because I can't bring myself to interfere with anything that is alive. Every day when I wake up and every night before I go to sleep, I think about what I did to your wife, to you, and to your family; and I hope one day you will find it in your heart to forgive me." Joseph stood about 5 foot 7 to the truck driver's giant 6-foot 6 frame. Upon seeing his outstretched hand, Joseph swatted it away, at which point everyone in the room thought that this might backfire. Yet on the contrary, Joseph, after pushing his hands away, reached up and grabbed the big guy around the waist and hugged him with every ounce of strength he could muster. They both began to cry and sobbed, eventually falling to the floor in an outburst of grief and relief. No amount of money could ever bring Mary back, but this resolution would allow both families to begin again and reflect upon how a rather unconventional approach and a different way of looking at the worst kind of tragedy could be honored and lead to something life-giving, hope inspiring.

Our lawyer, both main character and witness, ended the story with this memory: "One by one each of the children, their spouses and grandchildren all joined in to create a sprawling mass of humanity on the floor coming to grips with the overpowering emotion of forgiveness. At that point, the family's lawyer and I looked at one another and said 'this is a good thing. A very good thing.'"

Dear church, can you picture the scene? To me, when I heard it, it felt like the ending of a holiday movie. But it really happened. The Word became flesh. How appropriate that Mark

began the oldest gospel by stating, "This is (only) the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah..."? The story of Christ continues and sometimes it finds its way into the harsh atmospheres of courtrooms, hospitals, prisons, and wherever the Spirit of God is given an opportunity to change darkness into light. May God grant us to see more of that! Comfort, comfort now thy people... And help us to think outside of the boxes we create for ourselves time and again, the boxes that trap us and choke our common humanity. Comfort, comfort now thy people...

Amen