

A Voice in the Darkness: Do Not Be Afraid
Matthew 1:18-25

We live in a confusing ethical time, don't we? There's been an avalanche of news about public figures who have engaged in sexual harassment and assault. I've been startled by revelations about men I have admired and respected, a little shocked by how much terrible behavior we've tolerated for a very long time. At some moments this has felt like a wash of much-needed, cleansing water. For women—and I think we have to say *most* women—there's been an opening to speak truth about things that were simply not spoken of before. And I have run into women who have developed a hair trigger on this issue, so that almost every man is immediately suspect.

But honestly, for some of those men who have lost their positions in the last few weeks, public figures I really like, I've wondered whether there isn't some way we could put their conduct into a larger context, maybe even forgive. So I see this tendency in myself: I'm much more inclined to question the allegations against men I admire, or who I feel somehow like I know. I'm more ready to defend them, even when I really know nothing about how they have conducted their lives.

There is very little in the world of ethics that is composed of sharp lines. I graduated from law school in the first year that the bar exam included an ethics test. My classmates and I mostly didn't bother to study for that part. Making an ethical decision is intuitive, right? We're good people; we know what is the right thing to do. But the exam was much more complicated—harder—than we expected. It turns out that decisions about ethics—both in the practice of law and in general—are not so clear. They often require a decision not between right and wrong, but between one choice that seems not quite right and another that seems wrong-er, or one value that rises above everything else in the situation in front of me. For just this moment, it can feel more important to be loyal than it is to be truthful. The short term fallout can make a choice seem impossible, even if we know it's the right thing to do in the big picture.

A few years ago I met someone who used to teach ethics at Harvard Business School. She had left her faculty position because her research indicated that while MBA programs had been teaching students for years how to wind their way through complex ethical case studies to find the right answers, the actual conduct of corporate life in this country isn't getting more ethical. The obstacle to 'doing the right thing' for many people in business, she discovered, isn't that they don't *know* the right thing to do; it's that they just can't bring themselves to *do* it. In her book *Giving Voice to Values*,¹ she says that even the strongest leaders, people who live by a 'can do' attitude, people who really do believe they can make a difference using their talent and hard work, feel they are powerless—like their hands are tied—when it comes to breaking corporate culture to do the right thing. Most of us assume that other people are just wrong—even bad—when they act unethically. But when we do it, we are quite sure we've been forced, or trapped, into making a decision we didn't mean.

¹ Mary C. Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values*, Yale University Press, 2010

These are the things we say to ourselves to rationalize our inconsistent actions, she says:

- Everyone does this. It's standard practice. Expected, even.
- The impact of this decision is not that big. It won't actually hurt anyone this one time.
- This is not my responsibility. I'm just following orders here.
- I know that what's happening here isn't quite fair (to someone), but I really don't want to hurt the people I feel more connected with (my team or my boss or my friends).

It takes courage to live a life with integrity, to overcome the fear and anxiety that comes with knowing that you may be putting yourself in a position where you are standing alone. When we find that courage, it often comes from recognizing how much truly at stake. When it seems like our next decision doesn't matter that much, we waver. We can rationalize acting in a way that doesn't reflect our best self.

But if we know that what we do next serves some purpose that's important, that our next act will be meaningful, that it will say something decisive about who we are or what that really matters in the world, then we can do almost anything. I think about civil rights activists: Rosa Parks, who overcame the fear she must have felt in that moment before she broke the law and refused to give up her seat on a bus. These Christians in Tahrir Square in Cairo, who surrounded the Muslim protestors who had stopped to pray, to protect them from violence by military police.

I'm thinking about Joseph, a man who went ahead and married a young woman who was suddenly and unexplainably pregnant.

We don't know much about Joseph. The only stories we have in the Gospels about Jesus' father are brief. You heard the whole thing this morning. Here's the summary: "Joseph? Yeah, he was there too." But let's look underneath those few words Matthew uses to tell us the story.

Mary and Joseph were engaged, we are told. In the first century, where they lived, engagement wasn't about making a romantic promise to each other. It was a contract, binding not only on them but on their families. Legally, they were as good as married; they just weren't living together yet. Try to imagine Joseph: a 'righteous man', we are told. That means someone who has followed the rules—of his religion, his society, his family. A person who knows right from wrong. His fiancée—this girl who is essentially his wife already—comes to him and says she's pregnant. She's cooked up some story about the Holy Spirit, but really—who knows?

The law told Joseph that he had two choices about what to do in this situation. He would have been totally within his rights to publicly break their engagement, 'out' Mary, even insist that she be stoned. And there was just one other option: to call off their engagement privately, to 'put her away'—which meant sending her back to her family, and probably out of the community, to have her unwanted, inconvenient baby somewhere else, out of sight.

That was the choice that was more likely to avoid public humiliation—not only for Mary and her family, but for Joseph too. No telling what would happen to Mary and her child in the long run, but Joseph would have been OK. This is what Joseph decided to do: he would divorce Mary quietly, just remove her from his life. It was how he could remain a 'righteous man' and still act relatively compassionately.

You have to read deep down between the lines to get a sense of what this situation must have felt like. Think about the betrayal and disappointment Joseph must have felt, and the fear and hurt that welled up inside Mary. She'd tried to explain it to him, that there was this angel who'd come to her. An angel who said that this child would be something divine, that her pregnancy was some kind of honor, not a shame. That she'd been *chosen by God*, whatever that meant. Clearly Joseph had not believed her...which meant that no one else would believe her either.

This was not a pregnancy filled with happy baby showers. This was a family that was barely holding it together. Each of them felt things we know something about: anxiety, conflict, mistrust. Every emotion but peace.

And then Joseph had his own dream. Another dream with an angel in it. Only this time the angel didn't just say 'Do not be afraid.' This angel came with a more specific charge. "Don't be afraid to *marry* this woman," the angel said. "The child she carries *was* conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will have a son, and you will call him Jesus..."

What?! This made no sense. It was almost like the angel was telling Joseph that if he wanted to follow God, it wasn't by following the law. Shouldn't he do the thing that he'd already worked out? Wasn't that the only way he could 'be righteous' and still be kind to this girl he used to think he knew? Was the angel saying that he should get *more* involved in Mary's not-so-righteous life? That he *should* do something that would expose him to other people's gossip and jokes, something that would change his reputation in a way he'd never be able to undo? I imagine that Joseph woke up the next morning and wondered whether he'd eaten bad seafood.

It was almost like the angel was saying to Joseph, 'There are more than two options. That wall that looked like it was right in front of you has a crack in it. I will show you a better way.'

You know what happened. Joseph made a decision that required of him a willingness to walk straight into the scandal that was unfolding in front of him. No doubt his compassion for Mary moved him, but it couldn't have been only that. Before the dream he'd had just enough compassion to send her away quietly. I wonder if the part of the dream that moved Joseph to stay with a woman who talked to angels, to take in her strangely-conceived son as if that child were his own, wasn't something else. I wonder if the part of the dream that stayed with Joseph, the part that gave him an extraordinary courage, wasn't the part that said, 'This is important. That child—the one you can choose to hold in your arms or not—will be *God with us—Emmanuel*.'

This decision is that important, Joseph heard. What you choose to do will make a difference—not only to you, but to something God hopes for. Something is being asked of you that isn't about following the rules or doing what's expected. What's at stake here—what you are being asked to help bring to life—might even be *God with us*.

I think that's what stilled the conflict inside of Joseph. Probably not in every moment; I doubt that Joseph never wondered again whether he'd made the right decision. There had to be days that felt like he'd cooperated in making his life impossibly hard. But in that one critical moment, Joseph knew what he had to do.

This is what angels do. They don't always look like their pictures. Their voices come in day dreams as well as night-time dreams. Sometimes their voice sounds like it's coming from deep inside of you instead of from something floating around your head. But in those moments when we're wrestling internally, not sure about how vulnerable we ought to make ourselves, this is what angels say: 'This is important. Do the right thing, the hard thing, the unexpected thing, maybe even the crazy thing. You too can be part of bringing *God with us*.' That's how they give us courage. It's another way of saying, "Do not be afraid."