

For Private Distribution Only

Imagine you are Joseph, a man—or should I say “boy”—possibly as young as **thirteen**. A semi-skilled laborer who is engaged to a girl possibly as young as twelve, as a result of a marriage arrangement made by your families. The plan is for the marriage to be finalized in about two years’ time, when she will move into your family’s home... Or, shall we say, that *was* the plan, until you watched Mary’s belly grow and, even shielded by heavy robes, it was finally undeniable that she was pregnant. There was **no possible way** that child could be yours, but whose was it, then? Mary confided to you that the seed was implanted by the Holy Spirit, but you have never heard of such a thing. Sure, the scriptures told how God had intervened and helped Sarah get pregnant, but that was a *little* different. I mean, there was at least an Abraham involved!

As much as you *want to believe* Mary’s words—for you have known her to be a good and a reasonable woman and have even grown fond of her—how on earth can you be expected to believe *this*? And how would it look if you were to marry her in *this state*? People will talk. Your reputation will go down with hers. You have every right to terminate the engagement and divorce her, to put an end to your parents’ careful negotiations, retrieve the bride price from her father, and walk away with your name intact.

But it wouldn’t necessarily end there. By Jewish law, the punishment for what amounts to adultery would be Mary’s execution by stoning... But you can’t bear to contemplate that. As much as it hurts that she has cheated on you, you do care about her and wish her no harm.

And who knows? Maybe she and this other man love one another. If you just divorce her quietly, then he can step in and marry her instead, and they can raise their child together. Yes, that sounds like a good Plan B. You will sleep on it and act in the morning. Perhaps as you prepare for bed you pray for discernment, for the clarity of a confirming **sign**.

And that's how an angel came to enter your dreams that night to affirm Mary's words about how she had come to be pregnant. And, even more importantly, to relate that the child was coming to fulfill an important role: **to save his people and bring God into their midst**. You would not know it until later, but the angel even tells you to give the boy the exact same name as Mary had been told in her own angelic encounter: Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus, a name that means, "Yahweh saves," and calls its namesake to live into that redemptive destiny. And so you suspend your initial disbelief and, in marrying Mary, adopt her child Jesus, bringing him into the ancestral line of King David through the backdoor, shall we say.

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Now none of this could have happened had either Joseph or Mary closed themselves off to possibility. For both were **called** into their parental roles by messengers of God. Both had **choices** to make, even Mary, who responded to Gabriel's maternal prediction with the classic acceptance line of a Hebrew prophet, "**Here am I**, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." ...I imagine that, when it came to selecting Jesus' human parents, God chose well. Certainly the character and the faith they display in this situation attests to that. But I also imagine that God had been preparing their hearts and minds for some time. Laying the groundwork for them to accept this very special child into their hearts and lives. Had either or both simply relied upon self interest alone, they likely would have made some very different

decisions. But because they were both actively engaged in the process and in their relationships with God, they bore the honor and responsibility of birthing the Messiah.

I wonder if any of you have ever asked God for a sign. And what sort of a situation might inspire you to do that... For me it has happened at times in my life when I have struggled to choose between a range of options that seemed to me to be equally valid and appealing. A pro and con list might do the trick for many people in a similar quandary. Undoubtedly truth is discerned, and God speaks through those logical exercises. Just not necessarily to me, who tends to do things a little more *intuitively*.

One of my most memorable discernment encounters came when I was deciding where to go to college. I'd gotten into three small liberal arts colleges located in the same general vicinity: two in Ohio and the last in, well, West Virginia. My first choice was the only one that hadn't yet sent me a financial aid award letter, and I feared the other two offers would expire if I did not act quickly enough. In a quandary, one night I knelt by my bed and asked God to give me a sign so I could stop agonizing and relax into a course of action. I was a teenager, *so of course* I had the radio on and tuned to the local pop station 24/7. And so, just as I was wrapping up my conversation with God, a song entirely unlikely for that particular station began to play--John Denver's "Country Roads." Incredulously, I listened to John sing, "Take me home, to the place where I belong, West Virginia, mountain momma. Take me home." Who knew God had such a sense of humor? Or a taste for country music? ...A little bit more pondering, and my fate was sealed. The rest is history.

Many years later, I learned that “Country Roads” was actually a song about western Virginia, not West Virginia... Oops... I hadn’t applied to any schools *there*... I **do** wonder sometimes how my life might have turned out differently had I chosen to attend one of the other colleges. I’m sure I still would have gotten a good education, made lasting friendships and wonderful memories. Things still would have turned out fine. The particularities just would have looked different.

And truth be told, we may **never** know exactly why we are led in a particular direction. Or whether we have discerned “correctly,” if there even is such a thing. Sometimes it takes **an entire lifetime** to gain such clarity. And sometimes it’s **never** readily apparent to the human eye. But, here’s the thing, **no matter what we choose**, if we stay **alert, faithful, and engaged**, God is able to work in and through the particularities of our circumstances. **Nothing** is wasted or lost.

We don’t hear about Joseph beyond Jesus’ childhood, leading many to the conclusion that he died before Jesus began his ministry. If so, he got to witness his foster son’s acuity with scripture in the temple, but not the powerful healing he would eventually invoke nor the controversial stances he would take on behalf of marginalized peoples. He would never know the full impact of his leap of faith... But lest we think that all Jesus got from Joseph were a name, a home, and a trade, we would do well to remember **the courageous, edgy example of righteousness** Joseph set right upfront in standing by a pregnant teenager and her fatherless son, in erring on the side of mercy in his interpretation of the law, and in his willingness to stay engaged, not just to Mary, but with God and with the process.

And lest we think that, unlike Mary and Joseph, we have nothing significant to offer up to God, we would do well to remember Jesus’ humble roots. Nothing good was supposed to have come

out of Nazareth...and certainly not out of an animal's feeding trough. It seems God does some of God's best work with material human beings would deem unlikely at best and calls us to see the world through the same upside-down lens.

Into *whatever* circumstances we are born or will ourselves, God is there and calling us to help the divine break through into the world. Male and female, we are all midwives and witnesses to the presence and the righteousness of Emmanuel, God-with-us, in this world of ours. Let us stay as engaged as Mary and Joseph and as vulnerable as the Christ child that we might warmly welcome him and **all that he represents** into our hearts and our lives once again this Christmas.

I'd like to close with a poem by the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic St. John of the Cross:

#### IF YOU WANT

If  
you want,  
the Virgin will come walking down the road  
pregnant with the holy  
and say,

“I need shelter for the night, please take me inside your heart,  
my time is so close.”

Then, under the roof of your soul, you will witness the sublime  
intimacy, the divine, the Christ  
taking birth  
forever,

as she grasps your hand for help, for each of us  
is the midwife of God, each of us.

Yes there, under the dome of your being does creation  
come into existence eternally, through your womb, dear pilgrim—  
the sacred womb of your soul,

as God grasps our arms for help; for each of us is  
His beloved servant  
never  
far.

If you want, the Virgin will come walking  
down the street pregnant  
with Light and  
sing...

(Excerpted from *Love Poems From God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, New York: Penguin Group, 2002.)