

Joseph



Matthew 1:18-25

Year A Advent 4

copyright © 2014

Freeman Ng

www.AuthorFreeman.com

Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
●	Bartholomew - an old friend of Joseph's	▲								●
▲	Joseph - a conscientious and unambitious man who just wants a nice conventional life	●	●	▲	●	▲	▲	●	▲	▲
▲	Nathan - a blunt and brutally honest friend of Joseph's		▲			▲				
▲	Rabbi - Joseph's rabbi, a caring man who values the happiness of his flock			▲					▲	
▲	Levite - a lawyer Joseph consults about his legal options				▲		▲			

Scene 1

Bartholomew , Joseph

{A friend of Joseph runs into him in the town square.}

Bartholomew *[nervously]* Joseph! It's good to see you...out and about.

Joseph *[innocently]* Bartholomew, God be with you.

Bartholomew *[chuckling awkwardly]* You're always so formal! Doesn't your oldest friend get a hug?

Joseph Of course. I'm sorry.

Bartholomew *[with feeling as they hug]* God be with *you*, old friend.

Joseph Bartholomew, is everything all right?

Bartholomew That's just what I was going to ask *you*. How are you holding up?

Joseph [*cheerfully*] I'm well. The preparations are a little overwhelming, but Mary is excited.

Bartholomew [*in confusion*] Are you talking about...the wedding? But I thought - I assumed...

Joseph What is it? What's wrong?

Bartholomew Don't you know? Haven't you heard the talk around town? Haven't you noticed...the changes in Mary?

Joseph [*anxiously*] No! Is she all right? Has something happened to her?

Bartholomew [*tenderly*] Joseph. Mary is pregnant!

Scene 2

Joseph , Nathan

{Joseph meets with another close friend.}

Nathan [*gruffly*] Sorry, but I thought you knew. What I mean is, I assumed it was *you*, and so of course you'd know.

Joseph [*scandalized*] You thought that I was the father? I would never! How could I?

Nathan [*cavalierly*] Well, I don't think it's all that hard. Happens all the time, you know. And you were engaged to be married, anyway.

Joseph [*incredulously and unsteadily*] It happens all the time?

Nathan [*moved to a gentler tone by Joseph's innocence*] Well, among the rest of us, anyway. Listen, I apologize. You're the straightest arrow I know, and I should have guessed it couldn't have been you. And then I would have realized that you weren't seeing it at all, and I could have told you. I'm sorry about that.

Joseph It's all right. I *should* have seen it. How did I not?

Nathan You're an honest man. It's hard for you to imagine deceit. [*after a pause*] Have you confronted her?

Joseph No. I can't do it yet. If I talk to her now, I know I'll be hurtful.

Nathan Always so conscientious! How about how she hurt *you*? She doesn't deserve any of the gallantry you're undoubtedly going to treat her with.

Joseph What would you do?

Nathan I'd have her stoned to death if I could! Or if that couldn't happen, I'd have her driven away in public disgrace and never be able to show her face around here again.

Joseph It seems...so cruel.

Nathan You've been a laughingstock around town for almost a month now! Did you realize that? And she knew it, too, and let it go on and on. Probably laughing at you herself the whole time, placing bets on how long it would take you to finally wise up. Think about that as you're deciding what to do!

Scene 3

Joseph , Rabbi

{After finally confronting Mary, Joseph discusses the situation with his rabbi.}

Rabbi And what did she say?

Joseph *[deeply depressed]* It was...I don't know how to explain it. I can hardly speak it. Rabbi, I think she's...not right. In the head. *[painfully]* She told me...she told me the child was God's. That it was an angel who...who came to her.

Rabbi *[flabbergasted]* Oh dear.

Joseph *[bleakly]* It's not possible, is it?

Rabbi I've never heard of such a thing, and there are no scriptures that I know of that suggest it's possible. On the other hand, *I have/i> heard plenty of stories like this. Some poor girl gets in the family way and comes up with a story about spirits or angels to explain it.*

Joseph She's not lying. I feel sure of that. She believed what she said.

Rabbi Then I suppose you're right: she's simply unbalanced.

Joseph *[sighing]* I'm glad I waited until I wouldn't be angry. Otherwise, I might have screamed at...at a sick woman.

Rabbi So, you never expressed your anger at her in any way through all of this?

Joseph No. I felt like it, but thank God, I never did.

Rabbi Have you yelled at *anybody* over this?

Joseph Who else would there be?

Rabbi Sometimes, people take out their anger on people who aren't even involved.

Joseph *[confused]* But...that would be wrong.

Rabbi Have you ever considered yelling at God?

Joseph *[scandalized]* Rabbi! You shouldn't joke like that!

Rabbi *[earnestly]* I wouldn't joke with you in your sorrow, and I would never joke about God. It can be helpful to yell at *somebody*, though I admit it's hard to see the sense of it unless you've tried it. And if you're going to try it, God is the one person you can't possibly hurt no matter how loud you yell.

Scene 4

Joseph , Levite

{Joseph consults with a lawyer.}

Joseph That's my story. And now I've come to learn what my options are, legally.

Levite Well, you have a few. You could charge her with fornication, in which case the punishment could range anywhere from a stoning to expulsion from the city, with the degree of severity at least partly up to you. You would petition the court for a certain outcome, and then it would be up to them to decide if it was justified.

Joseph What if I don't want to press charges?

Levite I'm glad you asked me that. For the record, it's the option I try to persuade people to take. I think there's enough harm already done

on every side in cases like this, and the best course is to simply walk away from it. A dissolution of your marriage contract would be very simple in your case, and it could be kept very quiet, too.

Joseph Thank you. *[after a pause]* I have one more question. What if I still wanted to marry her?

Levite Are you serious?

Joseph I just want to know all the options.

Levite Well, I suppose there's no legal reason why you couldn't. You're already contracted to be married, so you could just go ahead with it. But if you're seriously considering this, I should warn you that marriage to a mentally ill individual brings with it a number of legal complications that we should discuss. If you're seriously considering it.

Scene 5

Joseph , Nathan

{Joseph meets with Nathan again to run a tentative decision by him.}

Nathan *[outraged]* You're going to do what?

Joseph I didn't say I was going to do it for sure! I'm just thinking about it.

Nathan Well *stop* thinking about it! Right now.

Joseph *[pleadingly]* It's just that, I know now that she's neither a cheater nor a liar, and that's got me thinking differently about things.

Nathan *[at the top of his lungs]* How is marrying a crazy innocent going to be better than marrying a sane adulteress? Do you have any idea what you're letting yourself in for? She's not going to be able to take care of the kid, you know. You're going to have to do that all by yourself, and it won't even be yours!

Joseph Even if I had had a child with her, I wouldn't have considered it mine. The children...belong to all of us. I'd only be doing my part.

Nathan Okay, so let's talk about her. She could easily cheat on you again, you know. After all, she thought it was a wonderful thing and no crime at all to be "blessed" by the "angel". And what if her condition worsens? What are you going to do when you're having to restrain her from hurting herself and feed her like a baby and

clean up her messes?

Joseph *[meekly]* I don't know.

Nathan *[urgently]* Divorce her. Quietly and kindly if you must, but cut yourself free however you have to do it! There's no reason you can't still be happy. Someone else will come along.

Joseph Maybe, but where would that leave Mary? How would she live? Her parents have already disowned her. What chance would even a sane woman have in this world all alone and burdened with a child?

Nathan *[in a subdued voice after a pause]* Do you love her? Is that it?

Joseph *[dismissively]* I hardly know her. Though I did approve of the match. I heard such good things about her. That she was intelligent, and loving, and good. The only bad thing I heard...*[a pause while he suddenly realizes the significance of this forgotten fact, and then in a shaken voice]* was that she could be a little headstrong, a little willful.

Nathan And there it is.

Joseph Maybe I should have seen the signs. Maybe I should have refused the match when I could. But I didn't. And now I'm bound to her, even if the law would allow me to break that bond. I'm responsible. And I can't turn my back on her.

Nathan *[harshly]* Well, my friend, all I can say is this: if you end up marrying her because of guilt or some overdeveloped sense of responsibility, then you'll be the biggest fool I know, and you'll be miserable for the rest of your life. And: *[suddenly gentle]* you'll be a better man than me.

Scene 6

Joseph , Levite

{Joseph, barely coherent from lack of sleep, visits the lawyer again to report his final decision.}

Levite You look terrible!

Joseph *[wearily and distractedly]* I'm sorry. I...I haven't slept in...some days.

Levite *[sympathetically]* I imagine it's been a tough decision.

Joseph Yes. A tough decision.

Levite Well. What's it going to be, then?

Joseph *[forcing the word out]* Divorce!

Levite Very good. I'll have the papers drawn up. If you come back tomorrow morning, they'll be ready to sign.

Joseph Tomorrow morning. Yes.

{But Joseph doesn't get up to leave, and a long silence ensues.}

Levite Sir? Is there anything else? *[a pause]* For what it's worth, I think you're making the right decision. This is the cleanest way, the simplest. People who try to exact some kind of vengeance only make themselves miserable. It's best to just walk away.

Joseph To walk away...may God forgive me!

Levite Sir?

Joseph *[in a pleading, wavering tone]* I tried...I tried to decide...but I just couldn't. Nathan said I would be...a better man than him. I'm not. I never wanted to be a hero. I don't want to be visited by angels! All I ever wanted was a quiet life...a wife...children...my work. So you see? I couldn't do it...in the end. May God have mercy...on us both.

Levite *[kindly]* Sir? Try to get some sleep. I'm not sure if I'll be able to affirm that you signed the papers in a clear state of mind otherwise. Okay?

Scene 7

Joseph

{That night in his bed, Joseph tries to speak to God.}

Joseph *[beginning softly and pleadingly, but becoming increasingly insistent and then demanding and then even angry, and ending in a rage] Why? [pause] Why? [pause] Why??? [pause] WHY? [pause] WHYYYYYYYYYYYYY?*

Scene 8

Joseph , Rabbi

{The next day, Joseph visits his rabbi to report his decision.}

Rabbi *[in surprise]* You're going to do what?

Joseph Marry her.

Rabbi *[in genuine curiosity]* May I ask how you came to this decision?

Joseph I can tell you. I'm only going to tell *you*. *[after a pause]* The child *is* of God. An angel of God came to me, late in the night, and told me so.

Rabbi *[in distress]* Oh, my son. It was a dream!

Joseph *[quietly certain]* It was an angel.

Rabbi Listen, I of all people understand that God may work miracles in this world, and that anything is possible with Him, but I've also seen many times how a man in turmoil, faced with an impossible problem to which there is no good solution, will often grasp at some magical sign or arbitrary superstition to imagine himself suddenly free and clear of it all. But the illusion never lasts. It can't.

Joseph *[with quiet assurance]* Rabbi, it was an angel of God. If a man has never seen one, then maybe he can be tricked, or trick himself, or see something that might be an angel and not be sure. But now that I've seen one, I know there can be no mistaking it.

Rabbi *[suspending his objections for the time being]* I see. What did the angel say?

Joseph That the child was indeed of God, and that it comes in fulfillment of a prophecy: "A virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel."

Rabbi Joseph, that's from the prophet Isaiah, and has nothing to do with our time. It was spoken to King Ahaz of Judah, in order to assure him that he was safe from his enemies. The prophecy was that

before the child who would be born reached a certain age, his enemies would be destroyed. And it doesn't even say the mother would be a virgin! *[as gently as he can]* So it seems your angel of God doesn't know God's scriptures all that well.

Joseph I saw the angel. And I know he was of God.

Rabbi *[accepting the unalterable]* I see. Well, I wish you every blessing of God on the journey you're about to take. As I said earlier: with God, all things are possible. And I don't doubt but that he can give you a happy and prosperous life, whatever your circumstances.

Scene 9

Bartholomew , Joseph

{Several months later, Bartholomew runs into Joseph in the streets of Bethlehem.}

Bartholomew Joseph!

Joseph Bartholomew!

Bartholomew What on earth are you doing here?

Joseph I'm here for the taxation. We had to travel here.

Bartholomew You're from Bethlehem? Me, too! I never knew that about you. We could have traveled together!

Joseph We would have liked that.

Bartholomew "We"? Are you married now?

Joseph I am, yes. To Mary.

Bartholomew *[crestfallen]* Oh!

Joseph It turned out to be...the best thing to do. I think...I think we're going to be happy together.

Bartholomew I'm glad things worked out for you. And Mary is...well?

Joseph She's well, but always so tired these days. She's a good mother.

Bartholomew And the baby?

Joseph The baby! *[after a pause struggling to express his wonder and love]* His hands are so small...sometimes he seems barely to be breathing. He smells like...milk, like flesh. Like Mary. He's a miracle. He looks at me like...like he knows I'm his father, and then I know it, too.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
www.WineskinProject.net/blog/joseph*

Copyright © 2014 by Freeman Ng and the Wineskin Project

Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

www.AuthorFreeman.com