

Thanks to Marci Glass for inspiration. https://marciglass.com/2018/12/16/the-imperfect/?fbclid=IwAR3I6iHDgQIO_9ArC0Fhv0EbM2MJocEx8uzgz13LWFWcDhvXnbEmMc-hXJM

My latest library book for reading on the treadmill at the Y is called *Started Early, Took My Dog*, and although I got it off the murder mystery shelf, I'm not sure yet what it's about. It keeps starting over with different characters who have nothing to do with each other yet, though I'm sure that in time their paths will cross and the plot will thicken. But I was very taken with one vignette about a retired policewoman, now working as mall security, Tracy Waterhouse. Always a plain woman, she has now aged past her prime and, seeing herself in the plate glass of one store window, sees "the wild-eyed look of a woman falling over the edge. Someone who had started out the day carefully put together and was slowly unraveling during the course of it. Her skirt was creased over her hips, her highlights looked brassy and her bulging beer belly stuck out in a mockery of pregnancy. Survival of the fattest."

Tracy hears a child crying and traces the piercing noise to a woman known to the police, Kelly Cross, jerking a toddler by the hand and snarling at it to shut up.

Something gave inside Tracy. A small floodgate letting out a race of despair and frustration as she contemplated the blank but already soiled canvas of the kid's future. Tracy didn't know how it happened. One moment she was standing at a bus stop on Woodhouse Lane, contemplating the human wreckage that was Kelly Cross, the next she was saying to her, "How much?"

"How much for the kid?" Tracy said, delving into her handbag and unearthing one of the envelopes that contained money.

... [The astonished woman accepts the cash and boards the bus, leaving Tracy with the child.]

The bus drove off. Tracy stared after it. She registered a sudden spike of anxiety. She had just bought a kid. She didn't move until a small, warm, sticky hand found its way into hers.

Now, that was one poorly-thought-out action, and a retired police officer should know better. But you could say the same about Joseph, going against his better judgment, accepting Mary's mysterious pregnancy as part of his future now too. And Joseph even took time to think about it!

It does rankle a little, especially since I'm still rankled by the Brett Kavanaugh hearing, that women are habitually disbelieved about what happens to them. But honestly, what do we expect? If Christine Blasey Ford wasn't believed about what happened to her when she was 17, why would a first-century man believe what his teenaged fiancée says about *her* mysterious pregnancy? You can see that Joseph is at least a kind man, not wanting to expose Mary to public disgrace. And then he is visited by this angel of the Lord, who pushes him to commit. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." And as far as we know, Joseph never looks back. He takes Mary as his wife and becomes the father—caretaker, guardian, role model, teacher—of Jesus.

And this is actually pretty gutsy. We don't get a lot of angel visits nowadays, but they do happen, just well-disguised. If Joseph's story happened today, I hope that one of us could be the angel of gutsiness, listening to his debate with himself and encouraging him to follow his kindness rather than his fear. Or comforting him as he grieved the loss of his dream of the perfect wife and family. Or promising to stick with him and support him as he exposed himself to social opprobrium, not that that's quite as severe nowadays as it was then. For Joseph, the best way to be true to himself and true to what God called him to was to violate social conventions, and to lay aside the respectable reputation that he had earned.

A Presbyterian colleague, Marci Glass, recalls the kindness of people like Joseph when she herself was a pregnant teenager, excruciatingly ashamed and embarrassed. Her life was so far from perfect at that time that she could barely see a day ahead, but righteous and upstanding people in her community welcomed her at church and at school, took her to lunch, protected and cared for her. She says, “I can’t tell you how thankful I am for all of those Josephs, and for whatever angels it took for them to be able to greet my situation with grace. Their love for me through the difficult hours of my life showed me God’s love in ways that words never could have.”

At Christmastime there is an abundance of images of perfection—of beautiful, happy families celebrating together, and of the rosy-cheeked baby Jesus cuddled in a cradle-like manger. For a slide show that Justin and I are working on, I went looking for an image of the infant Jesus that *wasn’t* pretty, and it was almost impossible. The so-called poverty of the Holy Family is always airbrushed and colorized. But Marci Glass points out that the beauty of *her* experience as a pregnant teenager lay in the kindness of people who loved her without wanting her to be perfect.

Our “perfection” lies in sharing imperfection with kindness, with love. And that’s the power of the Incarnation. The perfection of the Holy Family, the couple with whom God entrusted the Christ Child, didn’t lie in their financial stability, or their remarkable physical beauty, or their ability to make and execute elaborate plans on time. What makes Joseph and Mary the perfect parents for the Christ Child is that they said Yes to the angels. They were willing to expose themselves to

ridicule and shame in the eyes of the world. Jesus got to be born, in part, because of human compassion in the midst of human imperfection.

As we continue through this Advent journey, let us remember Joseph, willing to answer God's call.

Here's part of a poem from David Whyte that sums up our call to be Joseph.

and how we are all
preparing for that
abrupt waking,
and that calling,
and that moment
we have to say yes,
except it will
not come so grandly,
so Biblically,
but more subtly
and intimately in the face
of the one you know
you have to love.
(The True Love, from House of Belonging)

Let us pray.

God of promise, you sent your angel to Joseph to give him courage to be kind, and to make imperfection beautiful. May we also be prepared for that abrupt waking and that calling; may we recognize the opportunity you offer us in the ordinary faces of those whom we must love. Amen.