

In the big Catholic church I attended when I was young, there were two larger than life statues of Mary and Joseph opposite each other on walls flanking the sanctuary, each presiding benevolently over its own side altar. Although the two statues were the same size, and given equal prominence (the church's designers paid ample homage to the gods of symmetry), Mary's statue was where the action was. She always had more candles lit in front of her than Joseph did. Brides left their bouquets on her altar before departing down the aisle. And to top things off, every year on the first of May someone built steps high enough for a little girl in a white communion dress to climb up and crown Our Lady with a wreath of plastic roses. Joseph never turned his head during any of this. He stared straight ahead, holding a very intelligent-looking toddler Jesus in the crook of his arm.

Given how little attention anyone paid to him, you had to wonder what Joseph was doing there at all. The sculptor depicted him as relatively young, a thirty-something or so. This was an unusual choice, as most artists through the centuries (perhaps as a way of coping with the strange notion of a virgin birth) have depicted him as old enough to be Mary's grandfather. In most nativity scenes I've seen he's usually positioned two steps back from the action, sometimes even asleep at his post. And even when awake, you most often see him holding on to his staff for dear life, perhaps still wondering what hit him.

Years later, living in New York City, I encountered an image of this neglected Joseph more complicated than the one that quietly presided over my catholic childhood. Around Christmastime I took the long subway ride uptown to the Cloisters to visit Robert Campin's fifteenth-century master painting of the Annunciation: Gabriel's unlikely announcement to Mary that she would bear a son without Joseph, so

to speak, anywhere in the picture. The work consists of three panels. The large central one depicts the main event as Luke describes it and this fifteenth-century Flemish painter imagined it. There is a ravishing angel, his wings shimmering in the exquisite layers of color of which the Netherlandish painters were masters, invading the quiet space of a courtly lady's bedroom. Campin paints Mary at just the moment before she turns to face the angel: in effect, Campin allows us to see Gabriel before Mary does. In an instant, in the next breath, she will turn and see God's ravishing messenger face to face, the way Moses saw God on the mountain. But where Moses comes away from the mountain bearing God's word carved on tablets of stone, Mary would quietly leave this cloistered chamber bearing the silent Word encrypted in her very womb.

Once again, in this painting, as in the church of my childhood, Mary is where the action is, in the full and shining Technicolor of this central panel. The panel to the left is much drabber, depicting the artist's patrons looking in from the outside, as well a mysterious figure that may be a portrait of the artist himself, hovering at the courtyard gate. And, in the panel on the right, you see yet another clueless Joseph. He is hard at work in his carpenter shop, busily crafting mousetraps to catch Satan in. As usual, he is slightly out-of-it, painted facing away from the action in the central panel, totally absorbed in his task. He is oblivious to the great scene unfolding in the panel to his right.

I find myself again sympathizing with Joseph. Compared to Mary's, Joseph's encounters with God in Matthew's gospel are played out in a minor key, more like our own. Matthew is the only gospel writer who takes any interest in him. As Luke tells the story, Mary encounters the angel of God when she is fully awake, fully aware, in the broad daylight of a thrilling revelation. But Matthew's Joseph encounters the angel only

in the dark of night, deep in a dream, that ancient, shadowy passageway connecting divine wisdom to human understanding.

Dreams are a form of chaos, most of the time, and one would think that Joseph's dream would reflect in some distorted and frightening way the chaos of his own life: a young woman pregnant, and not by him; the fear of public disgrace; a need to keep everything quiet; the urge to hide his shame in a darkened room, devising complicated mousetraps to ward off the Evil One. And yet, in the midst of his waking chaos comes this startling dream—startling because it clarifies rather than confuses. His dream clarifies the chaos by paradoxically deepening it. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid...” The writer of this gospel must have known that this was not the first time someone named Joseph would be forced to trace his way through a landscape of dreams. That first Joseph, Jacob's son, dreamed his way out of exile in Egypt to lead his undeserving brothers into a world reconciled and restored. And so too this second Joseph will dream his way to into exile in Egypt and back (“Go, take the child and his mother, and flee into Egypt”). He will carry with him in the crook of his arm a second Moses, a second Joshua, a second Adam to redeem our chaos and make our pathways straight.

We latter-day Josephs, men and women both, know a lot about chaos these days. Endless wars and bombing and fears of dying; mass shootings; children afraid to walk down the corridors of their elementary schools; children immured behind fences at the southern border, caged up in internment camps, the location of their deported parents untraceable; melt-downs of public conversation; a politics poisoned by bigotry and xenophobia and sheer lack of basic decency; God's own earth poisoned by our own greed and unmindfulness. Our waking state is a waking nightmare.

But it is not just the chaos of the outer world that haunts us in this Christmas season. It is also the chaos of what an artist

like Campin would understand as our inner selves—our deepest desires that lie at cross-purposes with each other. We feel that chaos when we want at the same time to embrace our families and to escape them; when we harbor private griefs or grievances in the midst of public joy; when in spite of the holiday, or perhaps because of it, we seek in our anger, grief, or sheer befuddlement to escape to a darkened room, to banish all semblance of dreams, to sleep in blankness.

And yet, as with Joseph, the dream of imminent redemption will come however much we try to block it, making of our mixed desires and the world's distress the stuff of revelation. If there is any hope left in a season so bedeviled by endless consumption and endless desire, so devoid of decency and civility, it lies in Joseph's dream: that deep in Mary's womb is buried not the sign of our shame and guilt but the sign of our salvation.