

Sometimes we have no choice about what happens—our only choice is how to respond
Other people make choices or circumstances come together so that it impacts us directly
It is not something we can change
Our only choice is about our own actions

The story of Joseph from Matthew 1:18-25

I'm guessing that Joseph was confused and pretty angry when he heard about Mary's pregnancy
How he heard—we have no idea—and it probably doesn't matter to the outcome of the story
Although I've always wondered if Mary told Joseph what happened
And with it the news of the angel coming to her, of Elizabeth and their visit
While I wish that were true, I suspect it was the whispers around town that he heard

After the initial shock, Joseph makes a startling decision
According to Old Testament law, Mary and the man she slept with were to be stoned
But scripture tells us that Joseph was righteous—other translations say he was just
Rather than subject her to public disgrace and shaming—even death
Joseph decides to “dismiss her quietly”
He chooses to be kind to her...
Although his understanding of what's right meant that he could not marry her
It seemed the prudent and just thing to do—let her go quietly

But before he carried out his plan, an angel came to him in a dream and told him to take Mary as his wife
The angel also told Joseph the source of her pregnancy and who the baby would be
The birth of this baby is tied to the prophecy found in Isaiah of a virgin birth and a son Emmanuel

Joseph is bold and risks his own shame by taking Mary as his wife
He cares for her and is there when the baby is born, raising him to become a carpenter

As I was thinking about Christmas this year, I came across the phrase “messy hope”
And I thought the story of Joseph is exactly that—one of messy hope!
Because hope is often messy and rarely unfolds as expected
Hope is trusting that even in the midst of our broken world God can transform our world
...even as we face the worst of the worst

At first Joseph did the prudent and cautious, but kind thing—deciding to dismiss her quietly
Then Joseph heard from God that he should proceed with the marriage
This hope wasn't just the hope of a pending marriage
This was messy hope—trusting God to make something of this whole messy deal
That Joseph could marry this woman who was pregnant
Now it was up to God to make something of it all
Knowing the rest of the story, we see that God was faithful to do that
Messy hope comes to all of us as we trust God with the mess around us

In Joseph's case—it appears that God came all the way to him in a dream
We have no record of Joseph asking God what he should do
And often God does do that—breaks into our life in a way we can't miss
And shows us the way forward

But there is also the invitation to take the messy muddle to God and ask, “now what?!?”
To hold the truth of the predicament before God and ask God to show us
All the while holding on to this messy hope and trust that God is with us
And that God will create something out of that which is broken

Usually we don't know the outcome
Occasionally, as with Joseph, God lays it all out for us
Other times, we are just given the next step or two
Sometimes we're told more, although we don't understand it until we get there
So it is all about trusting God when we don't know what will happen

There are times when it takes courage to live into the trust and messy hope
Especially when it seems to go against everything we thought to be true
First, Joseph chooses to break the Old Testament law by dismissing Mary quietly
Then he is so audacious as to marry her any way
I'm sure that both Joseph and Mary were criticized by people in their village
You must follow the rules
It's easy for us to see that Mary and Joseph did the right thing
But too often, the church has stuck with following the rules
Holding up the laws as God's way
Rather than the trust and compassion of messy hope
Living with the ambiguity of seeing what God will do...

I think maybe it takes messy grace to do the unthinkable and live with ambiguity of seeing what God will do
We like life to be straightforward and clear
But as the people of God—we want to hold on to messy hope and grace
Trusting God as we live in this ambiguous place of not knowing what will happen next
Believing that trusting God is more important than anything else