


ADVENT WEEK 4

Learning to Pause



*This is how the birth of Jesus came about.
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived
together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.*

MATTHEW 1:18

 IN MANY FAMILIES, birthdays are celebrated each year by sharing the story of the day that the birthday honoree was born and the events leading up to that day. Each year in the week immediately leading up to Christmas, the Church has a similar practice. We listen to

stories of Jesus' birth from two different Gospels: the Gospel of Luke, which shares the story mostly from the point of view of Jesus' mother, Mary, and the Gospel of Matthew, which shares the story mostly from the perspective of Mary's fiancé, Joseph.

In just a few short verses from Matthew's gospel, we are led to imagine how uncomfortable, even devastating, the whole discovery of Mary's pregnancy must have been for Joseph. In a village so small, everyone would know once Mary began to show and the rumor mill would have run wild. The first assumption of family and neighbors would have been that Joseph himself had violated Mary, trashing his reputation as a righteous man. Joseph, who knew this was not the case, was surely furious with Mary for sleeping with another man, but if he defended himself, it would put Mary's life in jeopardy. And, if he didn't defend himself, everyone would continue to think ill of him. Meanwhile, all Mary has to say for herself is an unbelievable story about an angel. Consider the confusion, doubt and torment Joseph would have felt. The scene is ripe for some kind of outburst or violence.

It isn't hard to empathize with Joseph, is it? Even if we've not been in quite such a heart-wrenching situation in our own intimate relationships, as persons involved in health care, we certainly have witnessed trauma. We've witnessed people who've suffered great shocks of loss and grief and disorientation—those for whom events can never be reversed, making it impossible to ever be the same again. We've seen the kind of outbursts or violence

that can result. Many of us have probably at some point in time or another been on the receiving end of a person's screams of rage—all of which makes Joseph's response to Mary's pregnancy the more noteworthy.

In the midst of all the drama of the situation, Joseph decides not to escalate the tension. Though his own honor is at stake, he doesn't "call Mary out." He decides to do the most compassionate thing for both of them—to quietly break off the relationship. But, remaining open to God's direction, he changes course after having a powerful dream that tells him not to be afraid. He allows family and neighbors to think what they will and goes ahead and marries his pregnant fiancé, taking the child-of-mysterious-origin as his own.

In the midst of the personal and work dramas we find ourselves wrapped in, perhaps we can take Joseph as our model. We, too, can pause and de-escalate the tension. Rather than reacting, we can respond, taking a step back to consider what compassion would look like in the situation—both compassion for the person or persons in crisis, and compassion for ourselves. We can try to remain open to God's voice that might gently direct us in a different way than we would have first thought to go. During a time of year that often feels so frenzied, we can ask Joseph to be our guide.

