

“Is This Love?”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 1:18-25
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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The day after Gabriel left, I began to second-guess whether it had really happened. Had I really spoken to an angel—an actual angel? Had I really agreed to a pregnancy—an actual pregnancy? I wanted desperately to ask my mother a myriad of questions about being with child, but I didn’t dare ask, not under these circumstances.

And so it went, that over the course of a day, I would start to wonder if it had all been a strange hallucination of some kind—an interpretation I found comforting, even if it did mean I was losing my mind. But by the time I lay down at night, the truth always came back full force and even my most rational objections couldn’t stop me from knowing my own terrible, miraculous secret. I don’t what it is about nighttime, but it’s harder to hide from what your bones know to be true when you’re alone and in the dark, when your usual distractions have turned in for the night.

I would lie down at the end of the day, so tired from fighting off reality, and I couldn’t fight anymore, and the truth would ripple through me and I would start to imagine his tiny toes and smooth infant skin. Everything in me would become fierce with the desire to protect.

Finally I would fall asleep thinking to myself, “I have to tell him. I really must tell Joseph.” Then morning would come and I’d feel all out of sorts and slightly sick, and I would decide to wait just one more day. But by noon I’d half-convince myself there was nothing to tell.

I went on like that for a while until one day, it was my day to bleed, but there was no blood. None the next day or the next, and that is when the knowing in my womb made it all the way into my head and my heart, and at last I was resolved. The secret must come out.

It is quite difficult for a respectable woman to find a moment alone with a man, so it wasn’t easy getting to Joseph. In the end, I had to enlist the help of my mother, who, it turned out, was even more of a saint than I thought. When I told her, her eyes widened in shock, then became teary—whether in fear or delight, I may never know. If she didn’t believe me about the Holy Spirit’s involvement, she didn’t let on, God bless her soul. She just got to work arranging a rendezvous on my behalf.

Telling Joseph ended up being much harder than telling Mom. For one thing, we barely knew each other. For another, I wasn’t assured of his unconditional love the way I was of Mother’s. There was still a question mark between us.

Mother says love is a seed you plant at the beginning of a marriage, then water it faithfully and watch it grow until it becomes something you can one day see and recognize. She reminded me of this on the day of my engagement to Joseph, when I was nearly in tears at the thought of leaving home and marrying a near stranger. Her wisdom and her faith in what the future could

bring were a great comfort to me at the time, but standing before Joseph now, my body trembling, all I could think about was that there hadn't been any time to water.

Already I was at his utter mercy, and he barely knew me. Already I would bare my soul to him, and there was nothing that bound him to accept my truth or treat me kindly. There were no roots to us yet, and I know many a man who would have gotten up and walked away, never to look back.

I watched his face carefully as I told him about Gabriel, God's message, my own consent, the miraculous life growing in my womb. At first he was unreadable. Then his eyes glanced at my belly, and for a split-second he was in awe. He looked upwards and a single tear rolled down his face. Still he said nothing. He closed his eyes, his face scrunched into an agony I could not interpret, and when he opened them again, the awe was gone from his face. In its place, pain and confusion.

I couldn't breathe.

"Mary." When he finally spoke, his voice was unexpectedly gentle, and his face, though pained, was kind. In that tortuous minute of silence, he had determined to dissolve our engagement quietly. Perhaps I could go away and stay with my cousin Elizabeth, he suggested, to ward off questions about my condition. If people did ask, he would reveal nothing. I had his word on that.

I knew I should be relieved. He could have had me stoned for being pregnant out of wedlock! He could have accused me of adultery and harlotry. He could have publically shamed me to defend his own reputation. He could have yelled or screamed or hollered obscenities at my seeming betrayal, and to any average observer, he would have been justified in doing so. I had likely just given the most pathetic cover-up story for a pregnancy in women's history. I could see that he didn't believe me, but he didn't treat me like a liar either. He treated me with dignity and respect, and was willing to have his own reputation questioned if that is what it took to keep my secret. I was ever so grateful for this radical act of compassion.

But to my surprise, I was also grieved. Mother said it would be absolutely nuts to think it could have gone any better than it did, and I knew she was right, but suddenly I went from this ambivalence about my pending marriage to wanting him. I pondered at this unexpected longing and wondered, "Is this love?" Mostly I just didn't want to do this pregnancy alone. There were no parenting books on how to raise God, and Gabriel hadn't mentioned anything about coming back to help me or keep me company.

I grieved my loneliness and the peculiar aloneness of this bizarre predicament no one was likely to understand. And I also felt guilty. I would think of my cousin Elizabeth, and other cousins like her, who had waited years and years to bear children, often to no avail, and here I was, pregnant without even trying. It didn't seem fair somehow, and had Gabriel reappeared, I would have pointed this out and demanded that he ask God for an answer as to why some women celebrate life while other women must mourn loss, why some women wait and wait and some women, like myself, get pregnant before even wanting it. There is so little logic to pregnancy.

I can see why Joseph would feel bewildered and unable to believe. I started to pray that an angel would please visit him too, to make him understand, but then I remembered how an angel had appeared to my cousin Zechariah, and that hadn't helped a lick! In fact, things for Zechariah got worse. The frightening angel stunned the speech right out of him, and he hasn't spoken a word since! What good would an angel visit do for Joseph? I mean, surely Elizabeth's pregnancy was easier to believe than mine. She may have been old and barren, but at least Elizabeth and Zechariah were, as the Bible puts it, knowing each other.

So I stopped praying for Joseph to get an angel. Best to let him alone. Mother says sometimes the way you can love someone is by letting him go. That's when I understood how loving his dismissal of me had been. He could have retaliated, but instead he chose kindness, and said goodbye. There was no romance or ecstasy to a choice like that, but it was love all the same. Mama said he was thinking about my suffering before his own, and there's only a handful of people in the world who can do that in a healthy way. Somewhere inside I smiled softly and felt blessed.

Then I placed my hand on my belly, where my little one was growing, and something inside my gut whispered to me, "You'll have to let him go too." I experienced a sudden sharp intake of breath, and I wanted to yell at that voice, "No! Not my baby. You can't have him." But I knew somehow that Love was asking me to loosen my grip and that I must learn to endure separation. I could see that my deep spiritual work would be learning to let go of those I love. It was a painful lesson, and one I had to learn it many times. Little did I know then just how severe the letting go would one day be.

Another lesson I learned was that sometimes when you least expect it, Love returns to you what you had released. Such miracles could never happen had you grabbed hold and refused to let it go, because control and dominion always stifle love.

To say it in a different way, a boomerang can't boomerang unless you let go. There's nothing to enjoy about a stationary boomerang glued to your hand, because by hoarding your treasure, you've denied it its purpose. Slowly, and with difficulty, I was learning not to cling. Of course, in real life, there is no guarantee that what you release will return, so it took a lot of practice to keep my hands and heart open when what I wanted was to shut them like a vault and throw away the key.

When Joseph came back to me, I was ever so surprised. I just knew the marriage was over and dead before it started. I never predicted a resurrection. But instead of walking away, Joseph planned a second secret rendezvous so we could talk.

"Mary, I am so sorry I didn't believe you," he began. "I mean, I did *want* to believe you . . ."

"I know," I said.

"It was all just so crazy, and I thought . . . well, it doesn't matter what I thought. The point is, last night I had a dream, and in my dream there was this angel saying you had conceived by the Holy Spirit, and when I woke up at first I thought I was 'just' dreaming, you know? Like your story

about the angel had worked its way inside my dream by coincidence, because I often dream about things I've heard in a day, but I don't assign them any meaning. I assumed this was just one of those dreams, you know? That it was no big deal, and I should just forget about it, and oh Mary, will you forgive me? I admit, I wanted to dismiss the dream as nothing but a dream, but the dream wouldn't let go of me quite so easily. I tried to go back to sleep, but the dream was very much awake in me, and finally I stopped resisting and made myself open to it. That flicker of belief I experienced when first you told me became a flame. The dream was less like breaking news and more like a revelation of what my subconscious already knew—that your wild story was true, and that I was being invited to be a part of the story. My conscious mind had tried to deny it, but in my sleep, with my defenses down, it turned out that I understood what you said to me more than I let on. What is it about the nighttime that makes it harder to hide from what you know to be true?"

I looked at him, pondering all these things in my heart. "It's one of life's mysteries, I suppose."

Joseph nodded, but I could see he had more on his mind. "Look," he said, "the only thing I know to do next is to get married right away. It's the best—maybe the only—way to protect you and that little baby from harm."

I experienced a sudden, sharp intake of breath. I shook my head. "Joseph, I don't think you *can* protect us, just like I can't guarantee this beloved child will be safe out in the world. I don't know if it's just a paranoid fear or a premonition, but something tells me this isn't going to be easy. That I may have signed up for a lifetime of sorrows."

"I could sign up with you," Joseph offered. "Maybe I can't protect either of you from pain or sorrow, or even death, but I think God is asking me to keep you company."

In that moment, neither of us knew just how much sorrow we would bear, watching God take on flesh inside our arms, watching him leave our arms to do his work in the world, watching him hurt and cry and suffer alongside the suffering, watching him endure ridicule and threats and slander. Neither of us knew just how much sorrow we would bear, resisting the urge to pull him back into our arms and not let him out of the house, resisting the urge to keep him safe, allowing him to become who he was meant to be. We didn't know how much sorrow we would bear, but even if we had known, I hope we would have signed up anyway.

"Is this love?" I would wonder years later as I watched him go. Even my mother hadn't warned me that loving could hurt like this. They tell me that the day my son died, he hollered out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But that's not how I remember it. To me it was my baby crying. "Mama, Mama why did you let me go?" and my heart was ripped in two just as surely as the veil in the temple.

But sometimes, when you least expect it, Love returns to you what you had released. When Jesus came back to me, I was ever so surprised. I just knew he was dead and gone. I never predicted a resurrection. But instead of walking away from this warring, bickering humanity, God planned another rendezvous and came back, came back with an intimate understanding of our pain and sorrow, an intimate understanding of how cruel this world can be. God came back with an

intimate understanding of just how powerful of a force love truly is. Then again, I suppose God already knew that about love. We were the ones who needed to learn it, that in some way or another, Love always returns. We needed to learn that Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That love never ends.

As one of your poets would say, “There is no time for a child to be born, with the earth betrayed by war and hate and a comet slashing the sky to warn that time runs out and the sun burns late. When is the time for love to be born? The inn is full on the planet earth, and by a comet the sky is torn—yet Love still takes the risk of birth.”

Amen.