

A LETTER TO THE CURIOUS,

You've been wondering about me for years, haven't you? You know that I'm Mary's husband. You know that I'm Jesus' father, sort of. The Bible quotes me exactly zero times, so while you may think about me off and on, I don't generally stay in the forefront of anyone's mind for very long.

Quiet people like me are used to this. Wood is my medium, not language. Ask me to do something, I'll do it. Ask me to build something, I'll build it. But public speaking? Letter writing? Not my thing.

You ask what Christmas means to me, and my first thought is, are you kidding? Isn't it obvious? Look at my actions. Haven't I already answered that question as clearly as I can? Quiet people the world over will never understand why we are constantly being asked to explain ourselves with words when our actions already speak volumes. But if you're still wondering, then here goes. I'll do my best.

For me, Christmas was the end of everything I knew for certain. If I could choose to add a new Christmas carol to your hymnals, it would be the REM song, "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)." Christmas was a colossal disruption. It marked the end of my quiet life as a devout Jew doing what devout Jews were expected to do. That wasn't a bad thing, but it wasn't exactly easy. And there were casualties.

The first casualty? My faith. Yes, my faith. I was engaged to Mary, which in my day amounted to a legally binding contract. I planned to take Mary as my wife, provided we both lived chastely under that obligation until our wedding day. Then, I discovered she was pregnant. Of course, I thought the only possible explanation for her pregnancy was infidelity. My Jewish faith gave me two choices. Publicly accuse Mary. But then she might be stoned to death for that. I could also divorce her. Dissolve our engagement quietly. The community would uphold and honor my first choice, but I chose the second. Wasn't that the kindest of those two options?

No sooner do I make up my mind than God asks me to unmake it. A messenger from God speaks to me in a dream, goading me to do what no decent Jew would. Stay with Mary. Stay with her in her condition. This meant, break faith with my faith. Go through with the wedding, consequences be damned. “The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,” was the explanation . . . which explained nothing.

I’m a descendant of the great King David. Mary is not. At some point in our lives, all the men on my side of the family secretly wonder whether their first-born son would be the one. The one to reclaim the throne of David. That messenger in my dream led me to believe that the child in Mary’s womb was the one we’ve all been waiting for. But how? It made no sense. The Messiah, we all understood, would be from the house and lineage of David. How could Mary’s baby be from that house and that lineage when he was not, in fact, my son? How could the prophecy be fulfilled on such a basis?

It gets more confusing, the messenger in my dream told me what to name this child, as if I were the child’s father! “You are to name him Jesus,” which means, “God saves”. If I consented to this cockamamie plan, I would either be a mockery of a father (“not the real father,” people would whisper), or my son would be the laughingstock of his peers (“little bastard thinks he’s the Messiah”).

I’m asked to trust God directly and dismiss what I’ve been taught to believe by my people. What a terrible choice. I was being asked to love a woman more than I loved God. At least that’s what this dream seemed to ask of me. How could I trust in such a dream? Why would I trust a dream more than the teachings of rabbis and priests. People I’ve known since childhood?

Christmas was a great disruption to my faith. But I said yes to God and no to my idea of God. I said yes, to my dream, and no to my culture. I said yes to the child in my fiancée’s belly and yes to thinking things through for myself even though I’m just a carpenter and not an educated rabbi. What if it was a figment of my imagination? Still I chose a life with Mary and the baby growing in her womb.

Faith, as I knew it, was the first casualty of Christmas. The second was my home.

My home was in Galilee. When I left for Bethlehem with Mary to register for the census (which is a nice way of saying “to pay our taxes”), I expected to return home. Then, Jesus was born, and before we could get back to Galilee, King Herod flew into a rage, threatening to kill every baby boy in that territory.

That’s when I had my next dream. “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you,”. “Egypt?” was all Mary could say when I told her the next morning. Egypt was the land of the pharaohs, the land that had enslaved our ancestors. It was the land of foreign gods and graven images, pyramids and taskmasters, plagues and pleadings. We had no money for such a journey. We had no people in Egypt to take us in. “Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him,” said the messenger. Ok again, was this just a dream, or was God speaking again?

Could Mary’s baby, our baby, be the one Herod was after? Yes, this meant it was time for frantic packing and preparing. We slipped out under cover of darkness, stopping for Mary to nurse, praying the baby wouldn’t cry at the wrong time. Stopping again, and praying that Herod’s henchmen wouldn’t give us a second look at the many, many checkpoints along the Roman roads.

What Christmas means to me is being displaced, first from Galilee, then from Judea. It meant gambling on Egypt. Of all the godforsaken places for a Jewish family in the ancient world. It meant scrambling for food, water, money, and shelter. It meant living as strangers in a strange land for God knows how long. It meant two perpetually bewildered parents caring for a Messiah in diapers.

You in the modern world are used to moving every time you get a new job. Your kids move out after they are grown and live in cities halfway across the continent. We didn’t do this. We were a people rooted in a sense of place. Mary and I were strangers in Egypt. My son’s earliest days

were lived on the religious, political, and economic margins of an utterly foreign culture. We experienced homelessness, immigration, hostility, and oppression. Ours was a fragile existence. When King Herod died, I had my third dream triggering our third displacement. This time I heard, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” So, there was even more traveling the perilous Roman roads and another round of starting over again. In Nazareth, we received a polite but distant welcome, our reputation in tatters.

In addition to my faith, in addition to my home, the third casualty from Christmas is what I’ll call the perks of fatherhood. Like every man in my culture, I wanted a son to carry on the family business. I wanted a son to care for me and my wife in our old age and to prioritize our needs according to the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and mother...” These weren’t just hopes and dreams; they were expectations.

Forgive me for wanting and expecting all that from Jesus. The third disruption of Christmas was not getting that sort of son. Jesus did not stay by my side as a carpenter when he grew up. He took off with his friends, calling them his disciples, and traipsed around from village to village, preaching, teaching, and performing miracles. Jesus did not make provisions to care for Mary and me in our old age. As for the fifth commandment, I won’t say that he dishonored me, but he was far more interested in honoring God. He called God “Father” and “Abba.” We didn’t see him much once he got going with that preaching business.

But the truth is, I don’t mind. I’m not unhappy about any of this. It was the right choice to take Mary as my wife and Jesus as my child. It was the right choice for us to live as refugees in Egypt, and it was right of us to return when we did. What I heard in my dreams was not crazy talk, and I wasn’t crazy for listening.

In exchange for the perks of fatherhood, I received something better. I got to watch my son take on his work as God’s son. And I didn’t try to stop him. Not when he left to be baptized by John, not ever. I heard tales of his wonders. Oh, I was proud of him. Jesus got everybody thinking for themselves just like the way God demanded that I think for myself years earlier. Jesus got

everybody to sort through what they'd been taught and compare it with what God actually wants. He got them to weigh things, make bold choices.

Sure I would have liked him by my side at the carpenter's bench, but I am honored beyond measure that I got a hand in raising him, protecting him, and preparing him for adulthood. I would have liked him to care for Mary and me in our later years, but he died young. He was executed.

Stripped. Flogged. Shamed. Murdered. Don't ask me for details. I won't speak of it. Not to you. Not to anyone.

After all was said and done, Jesus did provide for us in our old age. From Christmas to Easter and beyond. He left far more than any father on earth could ever ask for or imagine from a son. I love Christmas. Christmas gave me Jesus for a child, to raise and call my own, and then to relinquish for reasons I will not understand. Christmas upended all my expectations for a quiet, predictable life. It disturbed me to think for myself. It triggered upheaval and change.

Christmas snatched away the mundane and exchanged it for the wonderful. It deprived me of what I thought I was signing up for when I betrothed Mary, and it kept me guessing. It caused me trouble, worry, and sleepless nights, but it brought me joy and wonder. It made a father out of me. But more so, it made me a disciple.

I didn't understand Christmas while it was happening – I still don't – but I was part of it. I didn't know half of what God was doing while God was doing it, but I did the parts God asked me to do.

I hope you are as disturbed by Christmas as I was. I hope it's the end of the world as you knew it, and I hope that, like me, you feel fine about that.

I end this letter here. I've said more in these few pages than anyone's ever heard from me in one sitting. Words just aren't my thing. Anybody can talk. It's what you do that counts.

Truly Yours, Joseph, son of David.