

*Advent 3, The House of Bread...Waiting: baking*  
*Matthew 1.18-25*

We have been waiting. This is what we do every year during Advent. We wait for Jesus, the Christ to come into the world. So, one more year, as we wait, the world around us grows darker and darker...and colder and colder.

To focus our waiting we've been imagining *bread*. We're waiting for Jesus, the Christ, to be born, to be delivered to us...in us...within us...and into the world. Jesus, the Christ, the Bread of Life, will be delivered to us in Bethlehem...because of course the One who is living Bread will be born in the House of Bread.

While we wait the coming of Jesus, our living Bread, we've been imagining the ways in which we, too, are being prepared as living bread. Our lives, individually and as community, are leavened by the Spirit of G-D. And when leavening does its work, we encounter regular intervals of being punched down. The process of being kneaded prepares us to rise up again, filling with the Breath of G-D. And now...since last Sunday we've been rising, getting ready to be placed into the oven for baking.

The dough will stay in the oven, baking, until it is ready. Until it is time. Until it is bread. Life-giving bread.

Each part of the breadmaking process has its particular work and challenges. But when we get to the baking stage, there's nothing to do but wait. The leaven has done its work. The kneading has been done. The rising is finished. And now we wait. We wait while time...and heat...do their work.

Time and heat. If the time isn't long enough, or if the time is too long, the bread isn't edible. If there isn't enough heat, the dough won't bake; but if there's too much heat, the

loaf will become hard or burned. The baking process needs the right amount of time. And the right amount of heat.

The story that Matthew tells about the birth of Jesus is a story about enough time and enough heat. Matthew doesn't tell us Mary's story...we need the other writers for her story. Matthew tells us the story of Joseph...Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was the son of Matthan, who was the son of Eleazar. All the way back to David, and to the other Jacob, the father of another Joseph, the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. It took three periods of 14 generations until the right amount of time had passed, until it was time for Jesus to be born.

This is an interesting telling of the Jesus story. Here's this meticulous genealogy of fathers and sons and grandfathers. Fathers of fathers...generation after generation. And every once in awhile we hear a mother and grandmother named. Almost in passing, it seems, Matthew names Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba ("David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah"). Just as he names Mary, a seemingly insignificant character in his story. But the women Matthew names aren't incidental; they're carefully chosen. Placing women in a patriarchal genealogy is significant. Naming these women in this genealogy demands our attention!

Tamar...remember the story of Tamar? Judah's daughter-in-law? Instead of having her marry his youngest son (after her first two husbands have died) following the law and custom, Judah sent her back home, to her parent. And when the time was right, she set out to take what was rightfully hers. And she conceived. A pregnant, unmarried woman. Judah called her a whore and demanded she be burned. But she couldn't be shamed because of course he was the father of her unborn child.

The reputations of the other three women carry similar tastes of shaming and scandal.

It is from this lineage that Jesus will be born. This is the lineage that has been baking. And Mary, the mother of Jesus, like the other mothers and grandmother in this genealogy, she too will feel the heat of shame. The Spirit of G-D has been breathing into this lineage. This lineage has been punched down and kneaded again and again. And each time, the Spirit of G-D breathes...breathing love and mercy, breathing grace and forgiveness, breathing hope and imagination. And new life rises.

Soon it will be time.

When Joseph found out she was pregnant, like his ancestor Judah, he was going to put Mary away. But Joseph was righteous; he was just. So instead of a public display, he decided to dismiss her quietly. Because he was righteous, he couldn't let the heat of shame and scandal reach him. And here I have to stop and acknowledge that I understand and empathize. I understand the impulse to separate myself from those with scandalous reputations, and with my own shame and scandal. After all, pregnant with the Holy Spirit?! If we're in Joseph's shoes, how plausible or believable is that story?

But before Joseph could separate himself from Mary and their engagement, he had a dream. Like Joseph so many generations ago, the other son of Jacob, this Joseph also had a dream. This dream required no interpretation: "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Joseph, the righteous man, recognized the voice of G-D. And G-D has just collaborated Mary's story. And Joseph didn't hesitate to take action. Let's imagine for a minute what this means for him. Joseph is being asked to take Mary as his wife. Even though he isn't the father of the child. His action would protect Mary from public shame and scandal, but imagine Joseph's shame and scandal. We don't know how public this information was. But Joseph knows he didn't and couldn't have fathered this child. What an insult and challenge

to his manhood, to his identity, to his ego and pride. That Joseph wakes up and, without hesitation, takes action, is evidence that he has been baking in the mercy and love and grace of his heavenly Father. The Spirit of G-D has been breathing life into him, preparing him and forming him. And now it is time.

In his dream, Joseph is given a glimpse of Mary's son, "She will give birth to a son," G-D's messenger tells him, "and you are to name him Jesus/*Savior*, for he will save his people from their sins." The product of this pregnancy (this bun in the oven!) will save Joseph's people from their sins. That's a big promise! A child who will heal a hurting people. A son who will liberate an occupied nation. This promise is about as believable as the Breath of G-D impregnating Mary! And Joseph says Yes.

Indeed, Joseph was a righteous man.

But what does it mean for Jesus to be *savior, liberator, healer* of sins? We think we know.... We've had millennia to try to figure it out.... G-D's people are still hurting...still occupied....

This story about Jesus and Joseph that Matthew is telling is most intriguing. Matthew is clearly linking Joseph to the ancient Joseph, the one who dreamed dreams, whose brothers tried to kill him and he ended up in Egypt, living in Pharaoh's court, saving his people from their hunger. That Joseph also prepared a place of food, a House of Bread that would save not only his family, but would feed and save Egypt's neighboring nations.

Like Joseph, the father of Jesus, the Joseph of old was also formed by G-D. The Spirit of G-D breathed life into him when his brothers punched him down and beat him up. In Egypt he was kneaded again and again. And the leavening of G-D's Spirit kept doing its work and Joseph would stand up, rise up. Joseph was shaped and formed by G-D's love and mercy, G-D's justice and grace. The house of bread was ready and waiting. And it all went well until Joseph's brothers showed up. Then it got too hot for Joseph. He wanted out of

the fire, out of the oven! His brothers had wanted to kill him. They sold him to strangers! They robbed him of a lifetime growing up in his father's house. So when these same brothers came, hungry, asking for bread, Joseph struggled. His Yes would mean letting go of revenge that was rightfully his. The Breath of G-D was at work while Joseph decided what to do: he had the power to take the justice that belonged to him, or he could forgive his brothers. The heat of the oven had done its work. He had been formed and baked by mercy and love and forgiveness. He could only say Yes. He offered the bread of reconciliation to his brothers. And they were saved.

And so we get a sense, a taste of the kind of savior that we're waiting for. Mary's son, this child that will be born out of Joseph's lineage, will offer the bread of reconciliation. It's slow bread. Baked from dough that's been rising through hundreds of generations, that's been punched down and kneaded, again and again. But it's living Bread! And those who eat it are satisfied. Deeply satisfied. Soul-satisfied.

A few weeks ago Gretchen described watching the bread coming out of the oven at Bimbos Bakery. Hundreds of loaves spilling from the ovens, the process and production automated to maximize quantity and profits. I wonder if we don't sometimes think of Jesus as this kind of bread, this kind of savior. We don't want to be baked through time. We want to be instantly produced, instantly saved, instantly healed. We want no cost or easy expenditures and maximum profit. We want the Bread of the World, the Bread that will save us, to be fast, easy, soft. We don't want to taste or endure scandal or shame. We don't want to bake through time.

But we *have* endured and tasted scandal and shame. And we hate it. So we hide it, we separate ourselves from it, because that's what we *think* we have to do. And our shame that's buried away, kept from the Breath of G-D, turns moldy and bitter.

But in this telling of the story of Jesus, in the lineage of Jesus the scandal and shame is exquisitely un-hidden. In the incarnation of Jesus, we see that “there is no shame in God—none!”<sup>i</sup> Or as Robert Farrar Capon says, “Shamelessness is the supreme virtue of the Incarnation.”<sup>ii</sup>

Matthew’s story of Joseph teaches us...shows us that Jesus, the Christ, the One whose delivery we are waiting for, will save us. Not by taking away and hiding our sins, but by un-hiding our sins...exquisitely revealing, using, reconciling them. The Spirit of G-D is waiting to breathe into our deepest, darkest, coldest shame and pain hurt and scandal. In the creating hands of our Holy Breadmaker, we are shown how to stay in the heat...how to stay through time...becoming living bread baked in the ovens of our lives.

We have been shaped and formed by G-D’s love and beauty and mercy and justice. The Spirit of G-D is breathing into us...into all creation...always breathing life...so that we can rise up...fed by living Bread...becoming living bread. In this story of Jesus we hear that we can trust G-D...trust G-D to use the very things that we find shameful...in ourselves or in others. We can trust that the One who feeds us living Bread is the same One who is already among us...feeding us...satisfying our hunger...saving our lives.

May we stay in G-D’s oven! Through time...enduring the heat.... May we stay...until it is time....

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<sup>i</sup> Kris Rocke, Street Psalms, 12/16/16

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted by Kris Rocke, above