

# Fourth Sunday of Advent

## GLORIOUS HUMILIATION

Matthew 1:18-25

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

18Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us." 24When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Shame, Shame

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Out of Bounds*

The "genesis" (lit., in Greek) of Jesus the Messiah happened

like this, if you have to know: Mary was found to be with child at an awkward time-not yet married, already promised. (Clumsily, Matthew says she was “found to be with child from the Holy Spirit,” but the last four words are getting ahead of the story.) Somebody saw she was pregnant. When you are not married, it is not good news to find out you are expecting. (I remember hearing glad tidings, with my wife, from a nurse who burst smiling into the room declaring “It’s positive!” Positive test results aren’t usually good news at a hospital, are they?) Mary could not have been happy about this, nor were her parents, and least of all Joseph. There were consequences.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Letting Her Down Softly*

Joseph was a “righteous” man. Wasn’t Mary lucky. So, with reference to what he was due and with due consideration for how we want the best for everyone, he decided to take it easy on Mary. He would not make an example of her by exposing her to public disgrace. The disgrace would be limited, the blow softened, by dismissing her quietly. No doubt he wanted to temper justice with mercy.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *Done for*

But mollify it as he might, Joseph knew he was consigning Mary and her “illegitimate” baby to a lifetime of obloquy. She and the baby would be the family’s flotsam, and their shame would stick to people who befriended them. The unnamed one in Mary’s womb had not drawn one breath, but was already responsible for ruining a life. Was Mary ruining this little one’s existence?

**PROGNOSIS: GLORY, GLORY**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *Begun*

But no, that tiny fetus was-if you can believe a messenger from God-all ready to receive the name that is above every name. Paradoxically, Mary’s disgrace was God’s grace. And it started

out with the saving of Mary herself from ruin, so that she could bear and raise the son who was going to fill that name up. The theology of the cross calls a thing what it really is, and that—in Mary—was God among us, Emmanuel. Mary and Joseph might have chosen some other names already, perhaps family names that sounded good with bar-Joseph, but God had other ideas. He would save his people from their sins through this child—a child who not only entered the world disgracefully, but left it (at least temporarily) the same way on the cross. But, more paradoxically than for Mary, Jesus' disgrace on the cross was the means for God's grace.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Advanced Solution) :** *Lifting Her Up*  
Joseph listened, after all, not to protocol but to promise. Listening and believing what he heard, he did not relegate Mary to oblivion, but lifted her up to be his wife, and with her the son who was soon born to them. But he didn't brag about how generous he had been to "save" Mary and her baby. Improbably, it was the baby (who almost ruined everything) who received the tag "savior." And receives it still.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Away with Contempt*

See Psalm 123: "We have had more than enough of contempt." Oh, yes, we know all about contempt. But because of the baby Mary bore, we fear it no more. For God has given us a glory that covers all our sin. And that glory is for all, Jesus made clear. Even sinners. Even people who don't have a really good excuse, as Mary did.