

Welcome

Five years ago, Portland-based comics artist Everett Patterson illustrated his family's Christmas card. The image, which he called [Jose y Maria](#), went viral. Take a look at Everett's updated Nativity. Take about a minute and talk with a few of the people around you. See how many connections to the traditional Nativity scene you can spot. (There are approximately 4 million, so don't worry about getting them all).

[Discussion and observation]

This image is super cool, and provocative for all the right reasons. I love it in part because it's so creative. But I also love it because it helps us to *feel* some of the scandal of that first Christmas. After all, you don't have to discuss this, but imagine the kinds of comments Jose and Maria might draw in real life. What kinds of assumptions might we make about them, about their life choices, about the circumstances that brought them to be stranded at the convenience store with nowhere to stay?

Jose y Maria makes me uncomfortable for all the right reasons. Because if you can feel a little of the scandal inherent in this image, then you're ready to feel the scandal of the first Christmas story: a story of God making all of us sketchy sinners into familia.

Message

This is the fourth and final week of Advent - Christmas is just days away! Christians all over the world are spending the four weeks of Advent preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Advent is a season of hopeful imagination. We look forward to the return of Jesus by putting ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the Messiah.

This year, our Advent series is called Christmas is for Dreamers. So far, we've been exploring the words of the prophet Isaiah, one of the first of God's prophets to look for a savior to rescue us.

We began by learning that, far too often, the things we want out of life are too small, too weak. The prophet offered us a bigger dream of a whole world coming to God.

Then we reflected on the nature of hope, that stubborn insistence that the way things are isn't the way things are always going to be. And last week, we saw that hope in a better world spurs us to action. Far from pessimists or positivists, we're active hopers, who join God in working to make the world a better place.

Today, we come very nearly to the nativity, to Jesus' birth. Last Advent, we spent a good deal of time with Mary, Jesus' mother. We listened in when she met up with her cousin, Elizabeth, as she sang her song of hope. This year, we're going to put ourselves in the story of Jesus' earthly father, Joseph of Nazareth.

[Scripture Slide] We know Joseph was a carpenter - the Greek word is really closer to 'contractor'. He built homes. That's about all we know for sure about him.

So today, since it's almost Christmas, I want to focus on what we *do* know about Joseph, and that's the fact that Christmas was a messy time for him. I know more than a few of you can relate to that. My parents divorced when I was 13, so I spent my teenage years with very messy holidays. Thanksgiving to New Years was one long shuffle between mom and dad and all the grandparents and step-grandparents. The holidays are hard for anyone, but blended families have the added stress of the extra hustle and bustle, even more strain on already strained relationships.

Of course you don't have to be a blended family to have holiday stress. Is there any of us who doesn't have a relationship in our families that's a little strained right now?

Joseph can relate to you. Contrary to what we probably imagine, the call to be Jesus' step-dad wasn't great news, at least not at first. It made Joseph's life significantly more complicated. And it took a dream for him to see the bigger picture. Let's read his story together:

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

Technically, Mary could've been executed when she was found pregnant out of wedlock. We don't have a lot of evidence of that actually happening in the first century - it was really more of one of those laws that was still on the books but no one actually followed. But just the fact that it was *technically* possible should underscore how shameful Mary's pregnancy was for her and her family. Joseph had his own reputation to consider, too. His work relied on his reputation.

Matthew tells us that Joseph's main concern, though, was Mary's reputation. So he made plans to break the engagement quietly.

In Joseph's world, at this time, this was the *right* thing to do. He was actually going above and beyond. After all, word would eventually get out Mary was pregnant. If he truly wanted to protect his reputation fully, he'd make a big public scene, demonstrate to everyone the child wasn't his and he was offended by her infidelity.

But he cared enough about Mary to want to spare her at least that. So he went above and beyond what was his right to do and decided to break off the engagement quietly.

Until the dream came:

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the

Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’ ”

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. -- Matthew 1:18-25

There's a moment in this dream we tend to gloss over: the angel commands Joseph to *name him Jesus*. Naming the child was, in Joseph's day, the father's role. So by commanding this, the angel is commanding Joseph to make Jesus his own son. To blend his family. To become Jesus' step-dad.

Joseph's dream is an expanding of his imagination. The angel offers him a bigger picture of what 'family' can be, one that is bigger than a loss of reputation. Bigger than the feelings of betrayal he's had. Bigger than the lost dreams of his future with Mary, changed now because she is pregnant.

All of that loss is still present for Joseph, but now they're swallowed up in something new, something bigger: Joseph is to be the step-dad of the Messiah, the one who will save Israel from her sin. Joseph, an ordinary carpenter from an ordinary town in the back-end of nowhere.

That's a good dream.

Joseph obeys: he sacrifices his own reputation and marries Mary. He cares for her, provides for her and takes the fatherly responsibility of naming his step-son, Jesus.

Remember: Joseph had every *right* to call off the engagement. But God gave Joseph a new dream. God invited Joseph to do not what's right, but what's *good*. Joseph extends his idea of family to include this son who isn't his, and in doing so, Joseph imagines himself right into God's family.

This time of year is complicated for most everyone I know. We're bombarded by messages of peace on earth and goodwill toward all people, but the reality for most of us is harried, hurried and anxious. Peace feels more like a pipe dream than a reality. And especially now, this week, as we face down a couple of weeks of travel, of blended families and extended families and all the headaches that come with them, the Us vs Them divide can seem, ironically, more pronounced than at other times of the year.

What we need is a vision for a bigger definition of family, one that expands to include all the hurts and hang-ups and strangeness that is our families today.

There are any number of reasons our families are complicated. For some of us, there are some real wounds - damage inflicted on us by other members of our family. Our homes aren't a safe place. Christmas can be a time we want to get in and get out as quickly as possible.

Can you imagine a family that's safe for you, a home where you don't have to live with your guard up? Who are those people in your life? What does it mean to call them family?

Some of us are facing a lonely Christmas this year. A relationship ended, or someone who was here last year is gone. Maybe the kids are with your ex, or your nest is empty. How can your picture of family expand? Who can you be present to? What unique opportunities is God calling you into this year? What new possibilities are before you?

Some of us are hosting this year, and there's a person we're already dreading will darken our doorstep. Maybe they're an in-law or maybe they're blood that's gone bad. Can you imagine a world where your table has a spot for them? Can you imagine the possibility that God has called you to name them family, to welcome them not because it's right, but because it's *good*?

Some of us this year are going to encounter strangers, people who aren't part of our family but who God brings into our path. We'll have the opportunity to ignore them, or to imagine them into our family.

This is a practice that's been near and dear to my wife and I's hearts our whole marriage. We're nearly always in town for Thanksgiving, a holiday that's almost as marked with stress and pain as the Christmas season. So we make it a point to extend our imagined family to include anyone we know who isn't already eating somewhere else (and pretty often, people who ate somewhere else for lunch). We intentionally prepare way too much food and put out the invite: come be part of our family today!

We're recipients of that same kind of hospitality, too. Every year we've been here in Texas, John and Vanessa Hewitt always invited us over on Christmas Eve to join in their family tradition of Tex-Mex Christmas Eve. We're never with our biological families at Christmas because it's important to us to be with our church family. And we've been grateful that the Hewitts have adopted us every year, expanded their definition of family to include us.

So here, just a few days before we celebrate Christmas, I want to ask you how God is inviting you to dream about a bigger family. Who's excluded from your picture of family? Who might God be calling you to imagine into your family? How can you create new possibilities this Christmas?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] asdf

1. Asdf
2. Asdf
3. Asdf

4. Asd

Assignment + Blessing

How is God expanding your idea of family as you approach Christmas?