

'Tis the time we watch or read again favorite stories to add meaning to this season. It's A Wonderful Life or Rudolph. A Christmas Carol or Charlie Brown. Matthew reminds me of a favorite short story by Michael Lindvall in which he imagines life as a church minister.

Donald MacDowell approached while sipping coffee after worship. It was the week before Thanksgiving. He said his son Larry would visit that week from Spokane, Washington, with his wife, Sherry, and their newborn son. Since they were in town, and Sherry's parents lived nearby and there would be a big family reunion, Don asked if I would "do the baby" next Sunday. I invited Don into my office to chat about the meaning of baptism. I asked if Larry and Sherry attended a church in Spokane, where promises made to love the child could be fulfilled. Maybe it would be meaningful to share baptism there.

Don listened in silence, offered no response. He just rose shook my hand and thanked me for the time. Now Don is a church elder, typically fashioning himself a dark-blue-suited follower of the status quo. He left my office, and promptly spoke to other elders about a special meeting. They asked me to drop by. They voted 9-0 in favor of baptism. The Sunday after Thanksgiving we "did the baby." When we came to the custom in our church to ask who stands with this child, Don in his blue suit and his wife, Minnie, and Sherry's folks and family ... the whole first pew or two stood with pride.ⁱ

Will Joseph stand with Mary's baby? Matthew tells us he typically fashions himself standing faithfully for what's right in God's way. Mary seems not right with rules of religion and society. She will parent God. All Joseph knows is it's not his. Engaged as they are, society affirms he could diss Mary shamefully—cast aside, even killed. He's inclined to dismiss her quietly, graciously, and just leave it all behind.

Our Christian faith celebrates Mary for faithful trust and selfless loving service. Enshrined in creeds like “born of a virgin.” Rightly so. Still, friends, we might explore more about what that really means. When Isaiah, as quoted, actually says “born of a young woman.” When Roman Caesars were said to be “born of a virgin.” What do the gospels try to tell us about how to follow Jesus? Luke has Caesar and Herod, Roman power in the census looming over everything, everyone. Matthew gives us intimacy with Joseph, the only gospel to really focus on him.

You see, Matthew writes to faithful Jewish people. He wants them to believe Jesus fulfills faith as they know and expect it—the Law, David and their long heritage. Joseph, not Mary, connects Jesus with all of that. As much as this scene centers on Joseph's faithful, ethical, heart-wrestling choice, Matthew's people would be right there with Joseph, in him in this story. Trying to live rightly God's way of love in their lives. Yet, challenged by how Jesus will embody Sacred Grace, Holy Love, bringing fullness life and peace and joy in ways that push accepted boundaries, religious rules ... like being engaged to marry.

Beyond standing by religious rules, the angel urges Joseph to stand beside Mary and her baby. We might remember if nothing else: in God's grace human relations always trump ideology and dogmatic positions. Matthew urges his people—and us—to stand with Mary's baby as good news of Jesus Christ unfolds through chapters of holy literature and of our lives to come. Joseph walks with them when

they flee as refugees into Egypt, cradling Jesus when Mary can carry him no longer. Joseph bends with Jesus over a carpenter's workbench, wielding tools, passing on life wisdom, while teaching the boy to make a living. And though Joseph is silent and unseen in the rest of Matthew's gospel, it's as if he rises to scan the horizon, to beam steadfast divine love from afar, as Jesus began to make his holy way through this world.

Who will stand? That's what we discuss when it's time for baptism. In our Christian history we've called them godparents. Presbyterians use the term sponsors. We're really flexible on the whole question. If you want 'em, fine. If not, fine, too. Recent conversation with one couple prompted me to refresh my memory about the history. In the early church, sponsors vouched for adults seeking baptism. Yes, the person is serious, is trustworthy in a time when others tried to infiltrate and persecute, and knows basics of Christianity to live faith fully. Later, when Christians began baptizing babies, a sponsor promised to support the child generally, especially nurturing love of and service to God. A God-parent. In hard tragic times, a godparent might adopt and raise the child if mother and father died or were unable.

Whenever we baptize, we are asked to nurture Mathias, Maggie, Liam; to stand beside all come to this font. All who pass through these waters with us. All people claimed as beloved children of God more than race, gender, economic status, political party, or any other way society may seek to define and categorize, confine and polarize. Years ago, in my second month serving among you, Session received a request from a family connected with our congregation but not members, to baptize their child here. More than just "doing the baby," our Session (many of you) discussed the meaning of it, in God's grace. Here's a glimpse. We affirm God claims and calls others through us, our congregation. And we bear responsibility to care, as we connect with other Christians, fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission. We consider each request personally and extend God's grace to all who want to know

Christ. We baptize without exceptions, with expectations to live that grace. That's what we believe it means when we stand at this font.

And from this font and table beaming through our doors and windows, we stand as a sanctuary in the city, for the life of our community, amid all creation. Friends, I believe God calls us to live as God-parents for one another and for all. Nurturing, encouraging, seeking signs, seeding grace. When bitterness still festers lingering hurt, we stand God-parenting the *healing* of mercy and forgiveness. When a diagnosis or loss weighs heavy on our hearts, we stand God-parenting the *hope* of meaning and purpose, joy and life yet to come. When conflict, misunderstanding, manipulation arise, we stand God-parenting the *work* of truth, reconciliation, and peace. When extreme weather heat, fires, hurricanes, floods affect all, especially the most vulnerable, we stand God-parenting *passion* for what makes all creation flourish. At office meetings, on phone conversations or social media, behind store counters, in classrooms and living rooms we stand God-parenting whatever helps others rise in their hearts, stand on their feet, and walk in resurrection glory—that is, a human being fully alive!

Dear friends, as we prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts, our lives, our world, for what, for whom will we stand in Holy Steadfast Love? “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid. Mary will bear a son, and you shall name him, Jesus, Emmanuel, which means God is with us.”

After worship on that day of baptism, as Michael Lindvall tells the story, a middle-aged woman sat in the front pew, bedraggled clothes and black plastic purse. She usually snuck in and out of the last pew, close to the door. Lost for words, constantly looking away, finally she said: “My name is Mildred Cory. What a lovely baptism.” Long pause. Then she continued: her daughter, Tina, just had a baby. Shouldn't it be baptized? I invited Tina to call me. Another long pause. Then

Mildred caught and held my eyes for the first time. “Tina’s got no husband. Eighteen. A boy from high school. She’s afraid to talk with a minister but she wants the baby baptized. She named the baby Jimmy.”

When I brought the question to Session, everyone knew who the father was—Jimmy Hawthorne, sports star, now in basic training at Fort Bragg. Some people questioned whether Tina would keep commitments made in baptism. The real challenge was what they pictured in worship. Tina, pimples on her chin, little Jimmy in her arms, big Jimmy long gone to North Carolina, and only Mildred to stand. It hurt in the heart. Still, they scheduled the baptism for the last Sunday of Advent.

Church was full, rumored snow hadn’t yet come. An elder rose, presented Tina and Jimmy, then kept staring at the card. Down the aisle she came, nervously, briskly, half-smile, shaking slightly, Jimmy sucking on a pacifier ... so young, so alone. I continued with liturgy, then asked: who stands with this child? Mildred, strangely out of place in the front pew rose slowly, sneaking glances side to side. I returned her smile, and then looked down preparing to ask the questions of commitment, when I caught movement in the pews. Donald MacDowell rose to stand in his blue suit. Minnie beside him. Then a few other elders, a Sunday School teacher, a new young couple ... soon the whole church. Tina stared, teared, cradling Jimmy closer, while Mildred hung onto the rail in front like the deck rail on a rolling ship. As water poured over Jimmy’s forehead, streaming back into wisps of baby hair, down his nose and cheek, every eye washed over the child. I saw Don straining to see with an open-mouthed smile ... as in that moment Jimmy became everybody’s baby.ⁱⁱ

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Adapted from Michael Lindvall, “Christmas Baptism” in *The Good News from North Haven* (Carmel, New York: Guideposts, 1991), 168-175.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.