

“Joseph’s Temptation”  
Matthew 1:18-25  
Second Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2019  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

\*\*\*\*\*

A number of you, I know, have read Tara Westover’s recent memoir,  
*Educated*.

Westover tells the story of growing up in rural Idaho,  
in a VERY fundamentalist family,  
with an abusive brother,  
and a bi-polar father,  
and a family that EXPECTS HER  
no matter how smart or capable she is—  
to stay home.

Formal schooling is out of the question.  
She’s expected to work in the family’s SCRAPYARD...all day, every day.

And after she’s grown, she’s not supposed to leave the family.  
She’s expected to marry someone nearby,  
and have children and raise a family at the foot of the mountain  
where she was raised herself...

But Westover is wicked smart.  
And eventually she decides to apply to college.  
She attends BYU.

Her parents accept it, but they don’t really accept it.

All of which creates an internal conflict in Tara Westover.

There’s a scene toward the end of the book in which Westover has spent a semester abroad, studying at Cambridge. The students have just enjoyed a lavish dinner on the final night of the program, a fancy affair in which, Westover writes, “The tables were set with more knives, forks and goblets than I’d ever seen.”

Westover leaves the dinner early.  
It doesn’t feel right.

She's just a girl who grew up poor, uneducated, in an abusive family, she had never even heard of the Holocaust until she went to college...and now she's eating all nice at an elegant dinner table in Cambridge?

It feels like she's a fraud.

But the professor who got her into the program, Dr. Kerry, he follows her out of the dinner.

Dr. Kerry says to her:

"...you...have as much right to be here as anyone."

"I would enjoy serving the dinner more than eating it," Westover replies.

To which Dr. Kerry says:

"You must stop...thinking like that. You are not fool's gold, shining only in a particular light. Whoever you become...that is who you always were...."

You are gold.

"And returning to BYU, or even to that mountain you came from, will not change who you are. It may change how others see you, it may even change how you see yourself—even gold appears dull in some lighting—but *that* is the illusion."<sup>1</sup>

### **You are gold, he tells her.**

It's a marvelous scene, because Tara Westover is having trouble doing what?

Accepting her gift.

Her brilliant mind, her ability to be an exceptional scholar—

I love that she's honest about her struggle with receiving this gift.

There is something in Westover's story that's found in our text for today.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tara Westover, *Educated: A Memoir*, New York: Random House, 2018.

This business about receiving a gift, and it doesn't quite feel like a gift.

In a different way, at a different time, for far different reasons,  
I imagine that Joseph was also a person who knew what it was like  
to receive a gift, but to have it NOT quite feel like a gift.

Matthew tells us that Joseph's fiancé, Mary, "was found to be with child  
from the Holy Spirit."

And Joseph does what?  
He plans to dismiss her quietly.  
Doesn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace, Matthew writes.

In other words, Mary's pregnancy, at first blush,  
doesn't feel ANYTHING like a gift.

Then Matthew writes "*...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream  
and said, "...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in  
her is from the Holy Spirit...*

*When Joseph awoke from sleep,  
he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him..."*

And what I want to know is what happened in between:  
*Joseph awoke from sleep*  
AND  
*he did as the angel of the Lord commanded...?*

Do you think it was an easy decision for Joseph to make?  
To take Mary as his wife?  
Or do you think he struggled with that decision?  
Do you think it took Joseph time to see this development...as a gift?

Imagine, just for a moment, how tempting it must have been for Joseph to  
IGNORE his dream.

Ah, just a dream.  
How many of you have ever made a life-altering commitment based on  
something as flimsy as a dream?

And imagine how tempting it would have been, even AFTER the dream, to let Mary go her own way, return her to her family.

I can only imagine what was being said in Joseph's family:

*What will people say about our family NOW, Joseph?  
Don't you care about US, Joseph?  
You say the child is from the Holy Spirit, Joseph?!  
Who's going to believe that nonsense, Joseph?!!*

In W.H. Auden's poem *For the Time Being*, Auden describes the scene this way:

**Joseph, you have heard  
What Mary says occurred;  
Yes, it may be so.  
Is it likely? No.**

**Mary may be pure,  
But, Joseph, are you sure?  
How is one to tell?  
Suppose, for instance... Well...<sup>2</sup>**

Dismiss Mary quietly, Joseph.  
Your family, your friends—everyone considers THAT a faithful decision,  
Joseph.

It is the safest thing to do.  
But that's not what Joseph does.

Joseph receives his dream, he receives his message from God,  
and then he takes Mary as his wife.

In the midst of what I imagine was outside pressure (my family says this, I was going to do this, now God says DO THAT)...in the midst of all that, Joseph receives the gift that God is giving him.

---

<sup>2</sup> From *Collected Poems*, by W.H. Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson, New York: Vintage International, 1991.

I wonder if Matthew has a message for us in all this.  
Let me get at it this way.

How many of you are going to be giving other people gifts for Christmas?  
Yes, of course.  
That's what Christmas means, right?  
It's the season of giving—that's what we've been taught about this time of year.

The holiday season is the season of giving.  
Don't get me wrong, there's nothing BAD with giving.  
Cyber Monday gets followed by Giving Tuesday...that's good.  
Jesus even says at one point in his ministry, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

But I'm not convinced THAT is the message Matthew wants us to hear in the opening chapter of his Gospel.

What if this chapter isn't so much about  
how you and I need to give right now,  
as it's about we are a people IN NEED of a gift?

What if, from this Gospel's point of view,  
we are a people who must receive God's grace,  
BEFORE we can ever offer grace ourselves?

Just look at the text.

One Rabbi has remarked, upon reading the nativity story, how passive the characters are in this story.<sup>3</sup>

Before Joseph does anything—  
before Joseph gave Mary a home to live in,  
before Joseph gave Jesus food to eat and clothes to wear,

---

<sup>3</sup> From Will Willimon's reflection, "The God We Hardly Knew," in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House of the Bruderhof Foundation, 2001. I am indebted to Willimon's reflection for the idea for this sermon.

before Joseph was a giver of grace,  
Joseph was a receiver of God's grace.

He received a message from God, a dream from God, a gift from God.  
Joseph did not order the dream, and he sure did not plan on this gift.  
At the time, it probably did not feel like much of a gift to Joseph.  
Mary is pregnant? What??!!

But he still received it.  
He still accepted it.

And it's THAT ability of Joseph's...to see himself FIRST as a receiver of  
God's grace and love, even when he doesn't understand that grace and love...that I  
find so moving.

Because that's not easy to do, right?

As Will Willimon puts it:

“This strange story [ie, the story of Joseph and Mary and the birth of Jesus]  
tells us how to be receivers....

“That's tough,” Willimon goes on to say, “because I would rather see myself  
as a giver. I want power—to stand on my own, take charge...help those who have  
nothing. I don't like picturing myself as dependent, needy, empty-handed.”<sup>4</sup>

None of us do, right?  
None of us like seeing ourselves as needy, as a RECEIVER.

Think about what happens when we age.  
Think about what happens when driving becomes an IFFY proposition for  
your aging parent.

And you believe it's time for them to turn the car keys over.  
And they do not want to turn the car keys over.  
And it's a very difficult conversation in a family.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

I get why it's hard to give up the car keys, we all do.  
None of us wants to be dependent on someone else to get us where we need to go...

Have you ever been in a position where you were hurting...or maybe in the hospital...or something was going on, and a friend says, "Anything you need that I can help with?"...

What's your first reaction?  
Oh, no...I'll be fine.  
Just need to get through this.  
Don't trouble yourself.

It's hard to see yourself as a receiver.

Think about how we are conditioned to see ourselves, particularly at this time of year, as GIVERS.

Do you remember the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*?  
I love this movie.

When Jimmy Stewart's character, George Bailey,  
is thousands of dollars in debt and can't pay  
it looks like he is going to have to go to prison.

And that's unimaginable.  
He doesn't want to live, wishes he had never been born.

So his guardian angel grants him a PREVIEW of that wish.

The angel shows him what the world would have been like if he had never been born.

All these people whose lives are different—not just different.

They're ruined. They're meaner. They're lonely.  
One person is dead because Jimmy Stewart's character George was never alive.



One of the stories that I love about what Fred Rogers—that’s Mr. Rogers—what Fred Rogers used to do is that he would go to speak to groups of adults, but sometimes he would start his speech in SILENCE.

On one occasion, he was invited to speak at The National Press Club.

The National Press Club was used to hearing diplomats, top administration officials...and some members of the press joked that with Mr. Rogers as their speaker, they were in for a “light lunch”.

So Fred Rogers stood at the podium, and pulled out a pocket watch, and invited everyone in the room that day—these people who had achieved so much in their lives—he invited them to remember people in their past...parents, teachers, coaches, friends...people who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much.

And he stood there, looking at his watch, IN SILENCE.

The room grew quiet.

Very quiet.

Except for the sniffing.

All one could hear was the sniffing of the audience holding back tears, as they remembered those who had made sacrifices on their behalf...<sup>5</sup>

Do you know what that’s like?

I don’t need to provide two minutes of silence right now, do I?

We all know what it’s like to receive a gift we could not give ourselves...

The pastor Scott Jones told a story recently about a friend of a friend who lives in Chicago.

This friend of a friend,

he had a nice family including his oldest son

who had just graduated high school,

whom he loved very much.

---

<sup>5</sup> As told by Thomas G. Long, in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

After his son graduated,  
this child started to distance himself from his family  
and plunged headlong into the drug culture in Chicago.

Over a year goes by.  
Then it's 18 months.  
They don't hear from their son.

And then one Sunday morning at 2:00 a.m, they get a call and it's the police.  
"We have your son. He's had a DUI. You have to come pick him up."

This father does what any father would do. He gets out of bed, goes down to the precinct, and explains who he is and that he's here for his son. They look at him perplexed. They have no idea what's he's talking about.

OK, it's Chicago, I'm sure there's a lot of precincts.

So, he goes to the next precinct. Same thing.  
He goes to two more precincts.  
Same story.

So, he decides to go the last place he remembers his son living, which was in a derelict part of town...it was a crack house.

He goes in and people are sleeping all over the place.  
He looks around and he locates his son sleeping on a mattress in a back room.

At 5:00 a.m. in this [filthy, dark, awful place], his heart breaks.  
He falls to his knees, then he kisses his son.  
And then this father gets up...and leaves.

About four months later the son shows up at his family's house.  
Then he shows up again three weeks later.  
Then again two weeks later.  
Soon, he's there all the time.

Slowly, he's integrated back into the life of the family.  
His father asks him one day what the heck happened.  
What transpired that took you out of the life you were in?

The son said, "Dad, don't you know? It was that night.

“You know the night you got the call. It was one of my friends playing a prank on you. We all laughed thinking about how you would have to spend your night in precincts looking for me - imagining the look on your face when you go to the officer's desk.

“But the one thing we never imagined is that you'd come to the house where I lived. Dad, we saw you coming down the street and we all dove for the beds. I wasn't asleep that night. When you walked into my room and found me, I knew you'd be so furious at me. I was readying myself for you to [cuss me out]...

“You want to know what changed me?  
 You didn't [condemn] me.  
 You kissed me.

You kissed me and that changed everything.”<sup>6</sup>

Long ago, a child was born into this world.  
 Not to condemn the world.  
 But to LOVE the world...  
     to love us even in the darkest corners of our lives,  
                     and CLAIM US as his own.

That child is who we wait for during Advent.

May that child be born again very soon,  
     in each of our hearts...  
  
     as a gift we do not expect,  
     as a gift we can not give ourselves...

Amen.

---

<sup>6</sup> From Scott Jones, “Live and Let Die,” on the Day1 podcast, September 29, 2019, found at [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004330/scott\\_jones\\_live\\_and\\_let\\_die](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004330/scott_jones_live_and_let_die). I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for drawing my attention to this story.