

December 18, Adv 4A (*Matthew 1:18-25*)

Joseph has a massive decision to make.

by [Christine Chakoian](#) in the [December 2022](#) issue

The British royals are not normally at the forefront of my attention. But now that Harry and Meghan, Duke and Duchess of Sussex, live here in Los Angeles, news about them stays on the front page.

Maybe you saw the news this summer, too, when Harry and Meghan returned to the Windsor family for the first time since relinquishing their royal duties, on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth's jubilee. Their change in status showed. Instead of sharing front-row seats with Harry's father and brother, they sat a couple of rows behind. They were no longer styled as his/her royal highness. Even their entrance was muted: instead of joining the royal procession, they walked down the aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral by themselves, holding hands. Did they belong to the Windsor family anymore?

It is amazing how fast a person's role, authority, and identity can be upended.

In LA there is no shortage of entertainment royalty appearing for the Emmy, Grammy, or Academy Awards. And after each awards show there are myriad A-list parties. Who is recognized and welcomed in speaks volumes about their status. So it happened that, after the 2016 Grammys, Paul McCartney came to Tyga's afterparty—and was rejected at the door. Apparently it was just a mistake; McCartney and others had gone to the wrong venue. Still, it gave me pause: How could someone that famous be dismissed? Did he belong to the family of stars anymore?

These stories came to mind as I read Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. The Gospel opens by certifying the identity of "Jesus, the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham." Then it spells out 42 generations of fathers—including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; David and Solomon; Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Amos. If a descendant of this lineage had no royal heritage or fame, who on earth would?

Yet one person's choice could erase it all: Joseph's.

Mary is engaged to Joseph. When she turns out to be pregnant—and not by him—it is a colossal disgrace to him and to his family. He, after all, is among the offspring of Abraham, of the house and lineage of King David.

He has a massive decision to make. He would have every justification to reject Mary in shame. And what a shaming it would be. The entire village would know she was pregnant out of wedlock. She would be returned to her father's household—if he would take her back—and never be able to have a new life. She could even be executed (see Deut. 22:13–20).

Instead, because Joseph is a righteous man, he chooses the most generous path that the law allows: not to shame Mary publicly but to send her home quietly, not to have her killed but to let her and her child live.

But even this very high bar of righteousness is not enough. Jesus would still have carried the mark of humiliation as Mary's illegitimate child—instead of being known as the offspring of Abraham and David. And so God intervenes. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, appealing to him as “son of David” and then revealing that this child is of an even greater heritage.

Righteous man that he is, Joseph chooses to open his heart to the angel. He chooses not to be afraid and not to prioritize his own identity, all the bona fides as a child of Abraham and David. Instead, Joseph does as he is called to do: to take Mary as his wife and to name this child Jesus, which means “he saves.” Joseph chooses to recognize this child's true identity.

Which gets us back to the beginning. If it is easy for us to dismiss the identity of famous people, how on earth do we recognize the sacred identity of the vulnerable, the invisible, even the disgraced? Real righteousness urges us to see every person as a child of God—and to welcome them into our hearts and homes.

It isn't easy. It brings to mind a story Kathleen Norris tells in *Dakota*. An older monk tells a younger monk, “I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, ‘Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?’”

The birth of Jesus was not just one and done. He is still God with us. And he keeps appearing to us over and over again, even if we do not know it.