

## Lost in the Middle

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Advent 2018



In the Christmas story, we meet Mary and Joseph at the beginning of Mary's pregnancy and we don't see them again until the birth of Jesus. But what was life like for them in between? We revere them now, but how would they have been viewed then?

At that time, family relationships were the fundamental framework of society and were built upon the foundation of belongingness. A person's role in the family defined their identity, and there was no concept of "the individual" who could make autonomous decisions. To do so would break the traditional rules of family order, and the person would no longer belong to the family or be accepted by the community.

Mary and Joseph clearly broke the rules. They lived outside of cultural norms. They were betrothed when she became pregnant. A contract was in place, but she had not moved in with Joseph, so their marriage was not complete. When Joseph discovered she was pregnant, he would assume she had committed adultery. It was within his rights to bring her up for public trial; instead he decided to quietly divorce her. But after he learned in a dream of the true nature of her pregnancy, he went forward with the marriage.

Mary and Joseph's actions dictated that their families would abandon them and the community would reject them. Even though they were being faithful to God, they had to deal with great hardships. How did they make it through this difficult time? How did lack of belongingness not turn into hopelessness?

I think Mary gives us a clue when she sings the canticle known as the Magnificat. *My spirit finds its joy in God, my Savior, she sings, for though I am God's humble servant, God has noticed me.* She knows that despite her circumstances, she belongs to a just and loving God – a God who will never abandon or reject her. I can imagine her singing this song when the pressures of everyday life threatened to break her. I can imagine Joseph listening and finding the strength to have hope for the future.

Every year the Christmas story begins and ends the same. The narrative in between is missing. We aren't told of the stress and challenges Mary and Joseph faced living in a place where they did not belong. Yet this is a crucial part of the story.

During the Christmas season, we may participate in the annual traditions of putting up a Christmas tree or lighting Advent candles, but not have the disposition expected of us. We may be hurting, anxious or depressed, feel drained or disconnected. We may be struggling with mental illness. Whatever the reason, what we are experiencing lies outside the cultural norms. We feel as if we don't belong.

Mary and Joseph chose to go against the norms, but we do not choose to suffer. Like them, we are enduring an arduous time, but like them there is reason to hope. Because despite what we are living through, we belong to a just and loving God. A God who knows our suffering is part of the story that needs to be told. A God whom we can always turn to for a soothing song of comfort - until the end of this Christmas season and into the future.



***Rev. Amy Grogan** is an ordained Disciples of Christ minister living in Brussels, Belgium. She is an associate pastor for the DisciplesNet Church, an online Disciples of Christ church that exists to share God's love with people who are not able to be part of a physical church. She serves as a Mental Health Advocate and teacher focusing on increasing awareness of how the language and depiction of mental illness in liturgy, preaching and worship can be harmful or exclusionary. Amy has an interest in creating resources that include theological interpretations of scripture grounded in the experience of mental illness.*

*Rev. Grogan serves with the Resource Task Team of the **Mental Health Initiative**. With hopes to support the prioritization of mental health and wellness in the life of the church, the Mental Health Initiative aims to establish the necessary awareness and understanding required to counter stigma and change the landscape of conversation regarding mental illness and disorders within the church. Learn more at [www.nbaca.org/mental-health](http://www.nbaca.org/mental-health).*