



The Rev. Adam Thomas, Rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Cohasset, Massachusetts, forwarded this letter. I want to share it with you today. The letter¹ reads:

Joseph, eldest son and protégé, to Jacob, my father, mentor, and confidant: Blessings and peace to you, my mother, and my brothers and sisters.

By the time you read this letter, I will have left home. I awoke in the still hours of the night to write it, and I imagine that when I leave, the sun will be many hours from rising. I hope someday you will welcome me back into this house. I know it will not be tomorrow or the next day. But someday, I hope.

By the fact that you have found this letter on my workbench instead of finding me there, you will have concluded that I changed my mind. You are correct in that deduction. I know we agreed on my course of action. I know what you said yesterday – what you've been saying for weeks, really – is still the correct decision. But now, as I sit watching the swaying light of a guttering candle, as my mind empties of all the noise and my heart fills with every new possibility, I find that our agreement is not *the* correct decision. It is simply *a* correct decision. But there is another, and this is the one I choose.

I know, father, that reading those words will make you want to tear up the rest of this letter at once, but I beg you to keep reading, because I must explain myself. I need you

¹ <http://ststephenscohasset.org/2013/12/23/the-midnight-letter/> (Dec. 20, 2014)

to understand how my heart has come to change. I need you to understand that disgrace is a small price to pay to do what I feel God is calling me to do. I need you to understand how my agony has turned to joy. In the simple act of choosing the better of two right answers, I find a weight I didn't even know I was bearing has lifted. I feel free. I feel like I am making the choice that truly reflects the man I want to be, the man God dreams for me to be.

Let me start at the beginning. I know I came of age years ago, but until the day you entered into terms with Mary's father and she and I got engaged, I never knew the weight of true responsibility. What I didn't expect was to discover my duty to wed Mary deepen into the love I now have for her. Though from that first meeting, we've never been alone, just Mary and me – still, whenever we're together, I feel like we're the only two people in the world. Everything fades except her strong, sturdy, quiet presence. When I think about the prospect of life without her, all I can feel is the absence, the ragged hole her disappearance would leave.

And now I can hear in my mind your argument begin again, father. What about your duty to your family? What about your love and respect for your mother and me? What about the marriage prospects of your own brothers and sisters, your own flesh and blood, if you ruin our reputation? Believe me, I am aware of the implications of my choice, hence my decision to leave home and spare you the humiliation. Nazareth is a week's journey from our home in Bethlehem. When Mary and I move there, we will be far enough away to keep you from public disgrace. Disavow me as your son and make my brother your heir. Then your legacy will be safe.

As for me, I will take Mary for my wife. I do this not despite her pregnancy, but because of it. I now know my life's purpose – to take care of Mary and her child. To love them, cherish them, and provide for them, come what may. The boy – yes, it's a boy – will call me father, but he will know who his true father is. No matter what I said to you yesterday, I now believe Mary's story. I've always wanted to believe it. I had been trying to believe it since she first told me because I knew in my heart a false word has never escaped her lips. But now I truly believe.

You once said to me, father, that believing means setting your heart on something. It's not just thinking or acknowledging something is right or true. Believing means taking all that's precious within yourself, all that makes your blood flow and your lungs fill, all that keeps you alive, and placing it in other, worthier hands. I learned that from you, and I've found something worthy of my belief – the unborn child in Mary's womb and the power who placed him there when she said "yes" to the angel.

You might be wondering what changed my mind. You had convinced me yesterday, after all. I was ready to have the hardest conversation of my life. But something told me to sleep on it, to give it another day. You know I've always been a heavy sleeper; I've never remembered a dream in my life. I didn't think I had them, which is ironic considering

whom you named me for. That Joseph could interpret dreams. He saved Egypt from famine. He saved the family who had sold him into slavery. And all because he listened to the special way God spoke to him.

Tonight I discovered I'm more like our ancestor than I imagined. I had a dream, but before you say it was "only" a dream, know that it was realer than anything I've ever experienced in my waking years. The angel who stood before me, the brilliance of his gown, the fire in his wings, the music in his voice – they made the real world seem dull and counterfeit by comparison. The angel gave me permission to make the choice my heart has longed to make, the choice that you and our neighbors and this society says is wrong.

Again, I can guess your mind, father. What makes you so sure of yourself? How can you discount your family and your culture so blithely?

Please know there has been nothing casual about this decision. I have been in agony since Mary first told me, and I know she has too. The decision I was going to make yesterday – to dismiss her as you wished – is correct by any measure available. But so is standing with her, remaining faithful, being true to myself and to my promises. Surely, you can see that, father. Choosing between right and wrong is simple for the most part. But choosing between right and right? That's the harder challenge.

In making this choice, I listened to Mary, whose honesty even you once said is beyond reproach. I listened to my own heart, which lifted from agony to joy the moment I changed my mind. And I listened to God, whose power and presence has been weaving in and out of this mess from the beginning. I can do no more than try to follow where these promptings are leading me.

I hope you can see that, father. I hope when the scandal dies down, you will be able to welcome us back home. Know that you will always be welcome at our home in Nazareth. Know that Mary and I desire with all our hearts for Jesus – that's what we're going to call him – to meet his grandparents. My prayer for you, father, is that you will do the same soul-searching I have been doing this night by the light of this nearly spent candle. Listen to those you love. Listen to your own heart. Listen to God. And perhaps you will find that what you believe, that thing you set your heart on, has shifted without you realizing it.

This is my hope for you. In the meantime, know that Mary and I are safe. We await the coming of our son with joy (not to mention some anxiety). He's not even born yet, and Jesus has already saved me from walking down the wrong path. Perhaps the right path will lead us all back together again someday.

With sadness and joy, I remain your loving son, Joseph

2 Samuel 7:1-11. 16';Ps. 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

We know almost nothing about Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, the Christ. This letter helps us see him as a human being caught between his birth family and the family he is coming to create. The one who recognizes that choices have consequences. Joseph takes the harder path because it is the path that God calls him to. This letter helps us, I hope, hear a part of one of the many untold stories in our Scripture. So many people are named, on stage as it were briefly, and then we hear no more. We too often don't know what their deepest hopes and fears were or what happened to them after they chose to follow God's call.

For example, what happened to Elizabeth after John the Baptizer was born? Did she live to see him go into the wilderness clothed in camels' hair and eating locusts? Did she live to grieve his beheading by Herod on the whim of a selfish and jealous second wife and step-daughter? We simply don't know.

We do know that Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and many others listened to the word of God calling them into uncharted waters where it was not always safe.

We do know that Joseph is someone we can admire. We may never have dreams as he did. We may never be called to choose between our birth family and the family we are creating. We can be like Joseph, though, in listening for the voice of God. We can be like Samuel, Mary and countless others in the Bible by responding "Here I am, Lord, send me."

God's call to us may be to live ordinary lives with ordinary people. Our lives may never have great drama, and for me, at least, that is a blessing! We can live lives in humble thanks that God chose, through becoming a human baby, to show us how to live. To bless us, as he blessed Mary.

Mary and Joseph were highly favored by God before the angel Gabriel appeared with unbelievable news. We -like Mary and Joseph- would certainly be perplexed if an angel appeared to us with such news! Although the text does not explicitly say so, there was most likely a pause, some quiet, some reflection, because we are told that Mary pondered what sort of greeting the angel Gabriel brought to her. And the angel reminded her that with God nothing is impossible. Most likely as Mary relayed the events to Joseph, he too was perplexed and pondered what this news meant for him as well as for them.

The angel's pronouncement that nothing is impossible for God might have prompted Joseph to reconsider his plans to divorce Mary. If nothing is impossible with God our response is, and always should be: "Here I am, Lord, send me." **Amen.**