

The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A – December 22, 2019 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony  
Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

We are almost there, almost to Christmas. Four candles are lit on our Advent Wreath. The next candle to be lit will be white, representing the birth of Jesus the Messiah. It will be lit on Christmas Eve as we gather to celebrate.

But not quite yet, there are still preparations to be made and things to be thought about on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent.

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” That is how Matthew begins the story of the incarnation, that event when God became human and dwelt among us. Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. The implication is that it took place in this way and in no other way. Concrete, settled, without argument. Not quite. Matthew was writing some 90 or so years after the event of the birth of Jesus. He was writing not a factual history but a story about how God had come into the world. Matthew wasn't present in Bethlehem when Jesus was born and no one living at the time of his writing was there either. So, this is not a strictly factual account. There were oral traditions and perhaps even some written accounts of the nativity. Matthew knit these all together, with some imagination, to begin his gospel, the purpose of which was to bring people to see that God was uniquely present in Jesus. Matthew was calling his community to become disciples. It was a very mixed community, probably somewhere in what is now Syria. They were both Jews and Gentiles with very different experiences of God and of life.

And so, in telling the story of the birth of the Savior, Matthew was inspired by the Holy Spirit to use information he had and imagine what it must have been like. This story is true at the very deepest levels. True and real not because of the details but because God came and dwelt among us. It is a story of faith and trust, courage and daring, and overwhelming love. Matthew chose to tell the story through the eyes and experience of Joseph.

Joseph is the almost forgotten character in most of our memories of the Christmas story. He seems to fade into the background a bit. In our creche. There is Mary, the Angels the Shepherds and the Wise Men and they all have “speaking” parts in the drama. But Joseph does not make speeches, Joseph simply does what God has asked him to do. I say simply, but it was not simple nor easy at all, this thing that God had called Joseph to do and to be.

Imagine the story with me, it goes like this. Joseph is a man of some years. One could not marry until one had a trade or occupation. Learning a trade, or becoming settled in an occupation took time and training. One did not begin to think of marriage until one had the ability to support a wife and the children that would follow.

Imagine with me how God turned Joseph's life upside down and sideways! Things were going according to plan. Joseph was a carpenter, established, and presumably now ready to marry. He became engaged to Mary a young woman some years his junior. This was serious

business. The first step was to agree to marry. The commitment was binding and rarely broken and then only for the most serious of causes. Betrothal was equivalent to marriage; infidelity counted as adultery.

The engaged woman continued to live with her family in her father's house until all was ready. The engaged man set about making preparation, building a house, acquiring the furniture and goods necessary, building a home. Again, this took some time, as much as a year. When all was ready the groom gathered his friends and they went together to the house of the bride. She was brought out by her father and "given" to the groom who amid much joy and rejoicing took her into his home, the home prepared for her. They began married life. That was what Joseph was anticipating. What his ancestors had done from time immemorial. But as so often happens in life, God had other plans. Those plans entailed an unwelcome surprise. Matthew says it so mildly; "...Mary...was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."

Last week Chris invited us to share with Mary the joyous news of the birth that was about to take place. He described her reaction as one of wild abandon, dancing, singing, exuberant joy. Joseph's reaction to the news was not quite the same. He must have been stunned. All of his plans, months of work and preparation and Mary was found to be with child. At this point in the story, Joseph does not know the second part of the sentence. He does not yet know that the child is from God through the agency of the Holy Spirit. He only knows what seems like a disaster.

Joseph is an ancestor of the beloved Jewish King, David. He is a man who is described as righteous, in right relationship with God. Joseph is righteous, meaning not simply a good and just man but one who follows the Law, the instructions given in the Covenant so many centuries before. The Law is clear in this instance. In the situation in which Joseph finds himself, he must divorce his seemingly unfaithful wife; the law does not allow him to simply to forgive and forget. Joseph is also a compassionate man. He does not want to expose Mary to public punishment. The penalty for adultery is stoning. This is serious business. And so, Joseph after much agonizing, settles on a compromise. He will "put her away, quietly" and get on with his now shattered life.

I imagine it is with a very heavy heart that Joseph goes to sleep. And in a dream an angel of God comes to Joseph. God intervenes and turns the situation and Joseph's life upside down and sideways. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Mathew, with colossal understatement tells us that "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the of the Lord commanded him;" Really???, yes really. Plans were upset, Joseph was beyond disappointment, he was filled with doubt. And then came the dream, and after the dream came trust, faith, and obedience. All of this happened to Joseph as a result of his encounter with God. And as a result of that encounter with God Joseph too knew deep joy. It was not like Mary's joy, Joseph's joy was quite different; quiet, patient, stunned even but a joy that was deep filled with awe at what God was about to do. Joseph, remember was a mature

man. He knew something of the world and he knew what God was asking would not be easy. Mary's joy was rooted in the future and what was to be with the coming birth. Joseph's joy was different, joy rooted in the knowledge that he was part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. He was an important part of that plan and he had said Yes!

Saying yes to God brings deep joy to us as well. Saying yes to God is coming home to the place that has always been prepared for us. Saying yes to God does not eliminate difficulties or trials. Saying yes to God gives us the audacious faith to move mountains, the courageous faith to do what God asks of us.

I imagine that St. Augustine's in the coming months much like Joseph. We will continue to encounter God in this place. We will have opportunities to embrace God's plan for this place. It will be a bold plan, a plan that could turn this community upside down and sideways, but always in a good and rewarding way. In the past you have experienced plans that were upset, disappointment and even doubt. Just like Joseph. And like Joseph, the time has come to listen to the Angel of God, to dream big dreams and embrace the future. As God called Joseph to trust, faith and obedience, so God calls St. Augustine and everyone here to those same qualities. Joseph had a choice, for God always gives us a choice. We too have a choice, we can say no or we can say yes. The angel had important words for Joseph, those same words will be important for St. Augustine and each of us in the days ahead. Do not be afraid, welcome what God has in store, even if it is a bit stunning. Just as Joseph did not walk alone, neither do we walk alone as we go forward into whatever God has planned. We walk with Jesus, the Messiah, Emmanuel, which means God is with us.