

Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

All of us are probably busy planning right now.....planning how we will celebrate the Christmas holiday. There are mountains of customary preparations to be made so that the celebration itself will resemble what we have envisioned. Most of us have some pre-conceived notions of how all of this should go and we work ourselves into a frazzle and a frenzy trying to make it happen.....just so. But I'll let you in on a little secret. A few weeks ago, none of us had a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving and I'm pretty certain that none of us are going to have a Courier & Ives Christmas either!

But planning seems to be part of our human nature. We make plans about a lot of things, particularly those things that will shape our lives in the future. But we are often reminded by circumstances beyond our control, that life is what happens while we are busy making other plans. It doesn't always turn out the way we thought it would.....or the way we thought it should.

We are nearing the end of Advent. It is a season of preparation. On the First Sunday of Advent we celebrated Hope. We believe and we hope that something wonderful is coming our way. On the Second Sunday of Advent, we celebrated Joy. We are anticipating what that wonderful thing will be and we feel great joy as it approaches. On the Third Sunday of Advent, we celebrated peace.....that wonderful sense of peace that only God can provide in our lives. Knowing that the incarnation of God is at hand, that deep sense of peace descends on us. And today, we celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Advent Sunday of love.

And indeed, the story that we heard in our gospel lesson this morning is a love story. It's a beautiful love story between a man and a woman. And it is a love story within an even larger love story. The larger love story is the story of God's love for us. That God loved us so much that he was willing to humble himself and enter our lives as a baby in order to reconcile us to himself. He was willing to become one of us so that we might always be with Him. It's the most wonderful gift that human beings have ever been given. It is not just the life that we were given on this earth, which is a magnificent gift in its own

right, but it is the promise of life eternal with God which is beyond all human imagining or expectation. That's love. That's powerful love. And it is love that is given to us by a generous and loving Creator.

Within this overarching love story of God's love for us, we hear another love story.....a more human and recognizable love story. This is a love story about Joseph's love for Mary and also Joseph's love for God. When he hears that Mary, his betrothed, is expecting a child, he is immediately thrown onto the horns of a moral dilemma. In addition to whatever hurt and betrayal he may have felt in learning this news, he is also faced with having to choose between upholding the law of God which is sacred to him or shielding the woman he loves from harm. It's a horrible dilemma with no apparently good outcome. Joseph is a righteous man. God's laws are part of his core being. To intentionally break one of those laws is very serious business and beyond anything that he can imagine. He and his family as well as Mary and her family know that Deuteronomy 22:23 says: "If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of the town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst." There's no wiggle room there!

If Joseph's heart was not already broken upon hearing of the news that Mary was expecting a child, it was surely broken by the prospect of Mary being publicly humiliated and shamed and then put to death. How could he let such a thing happen to the woman that he loves? They were engaged from childhood.....an arrangement made between their two fathers. They've known each other all their lives. They came to love one another as family long before they both agreed to become betrothed. An engagement was something that either party could break if they decided that they didn't want to go through with a marriage. But a betrothal had legal ramifications even though it was not to be consummated until after the wedding ceremony itself. The timing of this pregnancy is incredibly awkward. The couple are treated as man and wife legally, but they are not yet living together as man and wife so a pregnancy is theoretically not possible. God's timing, as always, is impeccable. God's timing preserves Mary as a virgin, but still provides an earthly father for Jesus in Joseph.

We've all heard this story so many times before, but it is easy to miss some of the most significant details of the story. The writer of the gospel of Matthew begins by going through quite an elaborate genealogy to establish that Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, is of the House of David. This is an important piece of information as the Jewish Messiah is

predicted to be from the House of David. This piece of information established Jesus' pedigree, as it were, as the Messiah of Israel. It fulfills the scriptures.

But Joseph still must grapple with this horrific dilemma. Obey God and allow Mary to be shamed and stoned to death or disobey God and protect Mary. It would appear to be a situation in which there is no good answer.....no reasonable solution. With our 20-20 vision in the rear view mirror we can clearly see that Joseph did the right thing, but on his side of this dilemma.....in real time.....it was not so easy. His struggle must have been immense. Can't you just imagine the conversation going on around the dining room table with his family? How would we have reacted if we had been Joseph's parents and obeying the law of God was the ultimate requirement of a good Jew? Perhaps they said to him. "Your love for Mary is clouding your judgment, Joseph. You know what you have to do. The law is very clear. We love Mary, too, but what she has done is unspeakable and unforgivable. You must obey God and you know the law. There are no exceptions."

Joseph is not going to be able to win here. If he protects Mary, he risks alienating his family and he himself being the center of shame and public ridicule and ostracism. If he obeys God's law, he must turn Mary over to die which is unthinkable to him. There are no right or good answers here. Like the thoughtful and logical and obedient man that he is, Joseph worked out a compromise solution in his own mind where he could spare Mary and still keep God's law.....sort of. He would simply quietly divorce her in the hopes that no one would ever find out the exact circumstances. It must have felt to him like a defeat, but the best he could do to still obey God and protect Mary as best he could. It wasn't a satisfying solution. He wasn't *really* obeying God the way he knew he was commanded to and he wasn't *really* protecting Mary the way he wanted to either.

And then exhausted, he fell asleep. With his body relaxed and his brain quieted, God spoke to him while he slept. An angel came to him in his dream and told him that it was all right for him to take Mary as his wife. The angel explained to Joseph that the child was of the Holy Spirit and that it would be a boy and that Joseph should name him Jesus which means "Yahweh saves" because he would save the people from their sins. When Joseph woke up, he knew exactly what he was going to do with a sense of certainty and peace.

God provides a way for us when we see no way. God provides the path through the troubled waters when the Red Sea is in front of us and the Egyptian army is closing in from the rear. When we open our hearts and our lives to God, we need to expect the

unexpected. God provides answers where we thought there were none and he shows us ways that none of us would think of on our own.

Can you imagine Joseph's sense of relief and peace when he awoke? There was no longer a struggle. There was no sense of doubt. There was no second guessing. There was a certainty in this decision that may even have surprised Joseph. He did exactly as the angel had told him to do knowing that he was technically breaking God's law and risking public censure and ridicule for standing by Mary under these circumstances. But he was, in fact, being obedient to God and he must have known that in his heart.

Sometimes, how things look is not as important as how things are. And sometimes it's hard for us to know the difference.

This could have turned out so much differently, but because Joseph was truly a man of God, it did not. He was open to God in ways that only the truly faithful can be. And he responded with obedience the way a man of God does. Sometimes the faithful thing to do is in conflict with social convention. Sometimes the faithful thing to do actually invites criticism and judgement. God's will is sometimes a hard thing to discern, but God guides us in each dilemma in our lives. We need always to remember that God is love and that very fact alone needs to guide our decisions and our judgments.

This is Joseph's story. In our customary way of seeing the nativity tableau of our Lord's birth, Joseph generally doesn't get much attention. The spotlight is on Mary and the baby, but without Joseph, Mary and the baby would not have been able to survive. Joseph models for all of us what it means to be a father and a husband....what it means to be a faithful man of God. In standing by his little family, in loving them and protecting them and providing for them, Joseph shows us what love looks like in human form just as God showed us what love looks like by becoming human. It's a love story within a love story.

Remember just one thing..... what our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry says to us frequently and with great enthusiasm, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.