

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

Imagine, if you can, a world with strict social controls on all its people; a world where the expectations are clear and the judgement is swift and sure. Imagine that you are living in that world. You are doing your best to meet the expectations others have for you and for themselves. You're a 'good' person in the eyes of your family, your friends and your neighbors. You are a righteous person in the sight of all who know you. And most importantly everyone knows that you are a righteous person in the sight of God. All is well with your world. You have the approval of those around you and your future looks very bright. You're a young man with a trade...a way to make a living for your future family. You are a carpenter which requires some skill and you are much in demand because you do good work. In all you do, you are very conscientious. You know what you're supposed to do...and more importantly what you are not supposed to do...and you do your best to measure up not only to everyone else's expectations of you, but to the expectations you have for yourself. You are at peace with your world. You know the rules and you follow them. You're on the brink of manhood...you are about to take on the responsibilities and the joys of being an adult. You have fallen in love with a sweet young girl who lives nearby. You are attracted to her not only because she is beautiful, but because she shares your values. She lives a quiet and obedient life as well. The expectations for young women are a little different than for young men but she meets those expectations just as you meet yours. You both know the rules and you are both most comfortable when you are following them. As a young couple you warm the hearts of all the adults around you who are certain that the two of you have nothing but a bright future ahead of you. Several months ago at your request and the request of your young lady, your fathers met to make arrangements for a wedding between the two of you. They both approved of the choices the two of you have made and they came to an agreement on the dowry your young woman's family would pay to your family. When that agreement was made, the two of you became officially and legally engaged. This is not the sort of casual engagement that can be informally broken if necessary. This is a legally binding contract, but it would be some time before you could actually marry and live together as man and wife.

Your first obligation as an espoused young man is to begin building a home for you and your bride. You will build several more rooms onto your father's existing home and those rooms will become your home with your new bride. Since you're a carpenter, the craftsmanship and detail on these rooms will be of very high quality. Nothing but the best for your bride! She waits

patiently with her family while learning all the skills she will need to run a household. All seems to be going well. Both of you know that it will take a year or more for the new home to be ready, but both of you are quite busy with all the preparations and dreaming your dreams of what your life will be like when the wedding finally happens and you can live together as man and wife. This is the world in which you live. And you are happy and successful there.

Your name is Joseph and you visit with your betrothed, Mary on a regular basis. You give her the updates on how the new house is progressing and she tells you about all that she has learned about cooking and making clothing and keeping a house and most importantly all that she has learned from her mother and her other female relatives about what happens when she brings new life into the world and how to best care for children. You and Mary are dreaming big dreams and relishing all the preparation you're doing. When no one is looking, you sneak a kiss which is very sweet for both of you.

On one of these visits, Mary takes you out to the fruit orchard...a little bit away from everyone else...so that she can speak to you privately. It's hard for her to get started with what she wants to tell you. She seems to be struggling with the words to use. Finally, she tells you that she has been visited by an angel who identified himself as Gabriel and who delivered an unbelievable message to her. Gabriel has told her that God has chosen her for a very special task...a mission...a very special part to play in God's plan for the world. Gabriel tells her that through the power of the Holy Spirit, she will conceive a child. It will be a boy and he will be the savior of his people...indeed, of the entire world. Mary is visibly shaken by this information. How can this be? Am I losing my mind, she thinks? Did I hear him correctly? This is impossible! She has been thinking of nothing else since Gabriel's appearance which was several days ago. She is so rattled ...but once she gets started the words just come tumbling out of her mouth at a much faster pace than her usual speech.

You are Joseph...and you are so rattled, you become speechless. There are no words. Mary's right. This is impossible and unbelievable. What is she talking about, you wonder? Has she suddenly taken leave of her senses? Has some mental illness struck her without warning? You are frantic to try to try to understand what she's telling you. Is she telling you that she's pregnant? And who is this mysterious 'Gabriel'? Is he responsible for Mary's altered condition? Is Gabriel...whoever he is...responsible for Mary's fall from grace? This is all too much. This can't be possible. This can't be happening. You leave Mary without saying much. You need time to think. This is a disaster!! As you make the walk back to your father's house, you are swirling in emotions. What Mary told you can't be true...it just can't. It's outrageous! You are angry and hurt and frightened all at the same time. You want to wrap your arms around Mary and protect her and at the same time you are so angry with her that you'd almost resort to hitting her. How

could this happen? How could she let such a thing happen? Why would she ruin her future with you? Your emotions are cascading like Niagara Falls...tumbling one after the other. You're clearly agitated when you reach your father's house. It's dinnertime, so the whole family is gathered in the kitchen. You are so distraught that you can't contain yourself. What you have just heard from Mary comes pouring out of you...one thought after another. Questions and questions and more questions. Your parents listen to you patiently and soon become as distraught as you are. All of you know what must be done. The law is very clear. There is no wiggle room here...no extenuating circumstances. Apparently, Mary has committed adultery and that's grounds for divorce which is what is needed to break this legal engagement. You and your parents mull over all the possible actions you could take. You don't want Mary to be shamed. You love her even though she has broken your heart. You still love her and want to protect her from the wrath that is to come. It's also possible that she could be stoned to death for what she has done. Regardless of how hurt and disappointed you are, the thought of Mary being stoned is more than you can bear. Your parents are sympathetic. "We understand, son. We know you love Mary and want to spare her. We love Mary, too. She's lovely girl and we've enjoyed making room for her in our family, but you have no choice here. The law of God is very clear. The rules from the Temple are very clear. There is no good way out here. You can't just do what you want here. You know what you have to do."

Each one of us can see ourselves as Joseph. We can all empathize with the emotional agony he must have gone through. Haven't we all been there? Haven't we all been in a situation or were faced with a dilemma that had no possible good outcome that we could see? Haven't we been in situations where we felt like we were caught between a rock and a hard place? Our hearts tell us one thing, but the law and social morés require that we take action that we do not want to take and that feels all wrong to us. We've all been Joseph at one point or another in our lives. And the answers are rarely crystal clear to us. Haven't we all wished that Gabriel...or someone like him... would appear to us and explain to us exactly what is going on and exactly what we should do?

By the time Joseph put his head down to go to sleep that night, he was convinced that he must as quietly as possible divorce Mary and break their engagement. His heart is completely broken. What a restless sleep that must have been...tossing and turning...looking for some way out. Joseph dreams in his sleep as many of us do when we have more on our minds than we can process in the light of day. In his dream an angel came to him and told him that it was all right for him to go through with his plans to marry Mary. All would be well. The child was conceived by the Holy Spirit which was the exact same explanation Gabriel had given to Mary. Joseph has been given the task of naming the baby...who will be a boy. Joseph's naming the child is a way of formally adopting him. By naming the child, Joseph is claiming him as one of his own. This

makes the baby Joseph's legal son and as such, he is now a formal member of the House of David...a requirement for the Messiah of the Israelites.

As in our lives, God has been in charge all along. Joseph wakes up the following morning with a profound sense of purpose and inner peace. When the call comes, Joseph speaks not one word either of question or objection. He simply acts directly and immediately in obedient response to the call from God. His certainty about his course of action is not blemished with a single doubt. He not only knows he's doing what God has asked him to do, but it has occurred to him that God has asked him to do something that he truly wants to do. Joseph becomes visibly and audibly an example of the power of God's call to transform our decisions and our lives. Joseph doesn't waste a single moment in hesitation. And this very lack of hesitation demonstrates Joseph's profound sense of trust in God. He knows this sense of certainty and peace is God's way of confirming that Joseph has heard God correctly.

Our God is a loving God and a God of unexpected actions. Just about the time we are sure we know who God is and what God wants, God surprises us. And sometimes God surprises us by giving us our heart's desire when it seems impossible for that to happen. We need to be cautious about our striving to be righteous...to avoid breaking any of the rules. Obeying the rules gives us the illusion that we are safe and that nothing bad can happen to us. That's indeed an illusion. It's not true. And we tend to believe that judgement of us will be more lenient if we haven't broken any of the rules. But following all the rules can also harden our hearts and that's not what God wants from us or for us. God wants us to have expansive and loving hearts...compassionate and empathic. God wants us to remain aware of our own humanity and our need for God as well as our need for other people in our lives. And we can't do that if we're busy being perfect.

Expect the unexpected from our God. And never doubt that even when we see no way out of a terrible situation, God always has the answer. All we need to do is ask.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.