

Advent IV Sermon Year A 2010
Sunday, December 19, 2010
"Home For The Holidays"
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Matthew 1:18-25

"An angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, 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."

Clearly Joseph's dream was not of a White Christmas or visions of sugarplums dancing in his head!

We don't know if Joseph said anything in reply to the angel's news – quite possibly he was rendered mute by the overwhelming, fearsome magnificence of the angel. But if he did say anything, I imagine it was something like this, "The child Mary is carrying was conceived by whom? You're pulling my leg? You have got to be kidding me, bro!"

We can only imagine that when Joseph woke up from this dream he wondered if he had eaten too much falafel the night before. "Oy vey, I can't believe I ate the whole thing."

Yet the scripture tells us that Joseph's response to this startling news of Mary being pregnant before Joseph had had intercourse with her is...total acquiescence. "So Joseph woke from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; and he accepted his wife." We should not blithely hear these words. Joseph's behavior in accepting the angel's command and continuing his relationship with Mary is completely counter to the cultural norms of his world.

Biblical parlance sometimes prevents us from comprehending the actual circumstances in a particular story. For instance when we hear that Joseph was a "righteous man" what we are being told is that he was devoutly religious, someone who scrupulously strove to abide by the Mosaic Law.

And when hear that he, "was unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace" because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy – which, by the way, he believed was the result of adultery – what it is really saying is that Joseph was not going to subject her to the Mosaic penalty for adultery which was to be stoned to death. Which, by the way, would have made him less "righteous."

Now, I don't know about you but when I think of being exposed to public disgrace, I think of what was done to women in France who collaborated with the Nazis. Once France was liberated, these traitors had their hair shaved off and were then paraded in public. That would be exposure to public disgrace. I think the scriptural use of this phrase "public disgrace" as a euphemism for capital punishment is woefully understated and deceiving!

And when we hear that Joseph was going to "dismiss [Mary] quietly" what it means is that he was going to send her off alone to fend for herself. Short of being stoned to death, being expelled from Joseph's protection placed Mary in about as precarious a position we can imagine. This presumed out-of-wedlock pregnancy would have disgraced Mary's family, so there was no going back home. And in first century Palestine there were no homes for unwed mothers or convents that would have compassion on Mary and take her in.

So the two remaining options left to her were prostitution – an unlikely occupation in her current condition – or begging. The reality is that dismissing Mary quietly was really all about Joseph saving face in his community. It was not about Mary and her unborn child. It is worth noting that as a religiously scrupulous man it would have been equally as disgraceful for Joseph to be in a relationship where he had been cuckolded; equally as disgraceful as it was for Mary being an unwed mother. Well, it was equal minus that stoning to death thing.

So why in the midst of such an unsettling situation for Joseph is he so compliant? Why is he doing what is diametrically opposite to what would be expected of him? In fact doing what his culture and his religion saw as being against his own best self-interests?

There is a small piece of me that rationalizes Joseph's compliancy by believing that, as with other parts of the text, we have a glossed-over, softened rendition of what the angel said to him. What if the angel actually said this: "Son, you are acting like an infantile jerk if you think you are going to send that young pregnant girl off under the cloak of night to fend for herself! Are you crazy? Man up, will you! Take responsibility for your relationship with her and do the honorable thing; take care of Mary. Regardless of how this pregnancy happened, it's not her fault. This is not all about you, pal, despite what you may think. There is something way bigger going on here and God will see you through it. Plus the last thing the world needs is another vulnerable unwed teenage mother who appears to have gotten pregnant by some cad who abandoned her. There are enough cads abandoning girls they impregnate in the world; we don't need another man who makes decisions based solely on his own neediness or fragile ego. Take Mary as your wife, Joseph. All will be well. God works in mysterious ways, you just wait and see!"

While there is no shortage of males who need to hear some fear-inspiring, kick-in-the-pants messenger of God telling them these very words, it probably didn't go down this way, despite how much I'd like to believe it. So back to the question: Why such a compliant Joseph?

From time immemorial it has been one of the strongest longings of the human heart to have our lives make sense, for each of us to have some redeeming, enduring value. As we grow older it also becomes increasingly clear to us just how short and fragile life truly is. Psalm 90:12 tells us, "Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom."

I think that Joseph came to this realization in his dream. In his nocturnal encounter Joseph really heard the angel's message and in that moment his heart grew in wisdom.

Like us, Joseph's heart yearned to have his life make sense. Like us, he wanted to make his mark on life, to know it had enduring value. In his dream that yearning came to fruition. It was an "Ah ha!" moment. Joseph realized that this was his golden opportunity to finally have his life make sense and to leave an enduring legacy about himself.

The author John O'Donohue writes this, "It is such a relief and joy to find the calling that expresses and incarnates your spirit. When you find that you are doing what you love, what you were brought here to do, it makes for a rich and contented life. You have come into rhythm with your longing. Your work and action emerge naturally; you don't have to force yourself. Your energy is immediate. Your passion is clear and creative. A new calling can open the door into the house of vision and belonging. You feel at home in your life, heart and hearth."¹

People often ask me how are they are to discern their call from God? They want to understand what purpose God has for them? My response is that they need to reflect on where their greatest passion intersects with the world's greatest need and then go with all their heart, mind and soul and address that need. Joseph's dream gave him the clarity to discern how God was calling him.

We know that his passion was to be a righteous man, which he believed was achieved by scrupulous adherence to the Law. The angel shifted his paradigm and showed Joseph that it is not by following the Law to the letter that makes a person righteous, it is by showing compassion and mercy to the most vulnerable in the world. This would be the paramount message of Jesus, now still an embryo in Mary's womb.

And in the context of Joseph's world, the greatest need in that moment was the protection of this teenage girl who was with child and facing a very bleak future. His dream provided the place where he saw his passion and this great need intersect. In that moment Joseph found both relief and joy to find the calling that authentically expressed his spirit.

That is why Joseph was so complaint in heeding the angels command. The angel's message allowed Joseph's life to make sense and gave it meaning.

We are in the season of incarnation. We tend to focus our time in Advent and Christmas recollecting and celebrating the birth of Jesus, God incarnate. Yet this season also is one of discerning how Jesus desires to become incarnate in us as well.

The incarnation of God is the boilerplate theology of what our relationship with God is to be about: an on-going process of hearing God's call to us, discerning where our passions meet the world's greatest needs and working to meet those needs. Discerning our authentic calling opens the door into God's house of vision and belonging. In realizing our call, our purpose, we feel at home in our life and in our heart because we know in following this call our lives have value and meaning; things that only God can provide.

God opened up that door into his house of vision and belonging for Joseph where he came to understand the meaning and purpose of his life. That worked out well for Joseph, Mary, the unborn Jesus and ultimately the world. God waits with an open door to that house for you and me as well. We just need to be willing to cross the threshold.

Maybe the lyrics of the Christmas carol have it right. There is no place like home for the holidays...or any other time as well.

Amen.

To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings by John O'Donohue (New York: Doubleday, 2008)