

Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year A

When Faithfulness is Hard

Pastor Samuel B. Adams

Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

22 December 2013

When the Johansen family lighted the fourth candle we completed the circle drawn by our Advent wreath. But we are not done. Our waiting has not ended. The circle is an ancient symbol of wholeness, of completeness, but we can see at a glance that something here is still waiting for completion. There is still another candle. The center candle is still not lighted.

As I was preparing this sermon, the Advent wreath became for me an image for the completion of our ministry here. The circle of Sundays among you that began in June, 2011 is complete. Today is our last Sunday. But the candle in the center is waiting for Tuesday evening, Christmas Eve, our final service with you when our ministry will be complete.

This has been a busy and challenging time for you and for us. We complete our time here with very mixed emotions. We feel much joy about where you have come during this past two and half years. And you have called David whom we believe is just the pastor you need. We believe God's Spirit was working in the PNC, and in David, to bring this call to completion.

That does not diminish our sadness to leave you behind. You have become part of our family of believers. And we will miss you. A lot. This is where I tell you that we will be less than an hour from Rocky Mountain National Park, and a little over an hour from Denver. And we have guest space that can be made ready very quickly. We would love to have you visit!

But the real message of your Advent wreath is much more. With its light that has grown with the passing of each week, it quietly proclaims a powerful message about God's purposed presence in God's own creation. The flames are tiny. Just as the One they announce will be tiny and fragile. Think of this. Our tiny circle of lighted candles is a two dimensional echo of the spherical world that God made, and in which we live.

Without gravitation to hold our tiny planet in place, it could simply roll endlessly through space, or burn away to nothing. Likewise, our spiritual universe only holds together with God as its center. The wreath with the light at its center not yet shining is like a life that looks complete on the outside, but still has an empty space aching to be filled.

In today's story, it's not Christmas yet. Mary and Joseph have not reached Bethlehem. Labor pains have not begun. The manger holds only cattle feed. We have two days left to prepare ourselves before we glimpse what God was doing then. And to become ready for what God is preparing to do here and now. This is not simply a lovely story, a precious antique. It is nothing less than the announcement of God's salvation for that world, and for this one.

Matthew has sent us as our teacher for today the most obscure member of the holy family, Joseph. Joseph. We know his name. That he was a carpenter. Not much else. Neither Mark

nor John ever mention him. He crops up a few times in Matthew and Luke, mostly in narratives of Jesus' birth. His primary importance in the story is that he brings Jesus into the lineage of David. By the time Jesus is grown, Joseph is nowhere to be found except in the mutterings of the home town people of Nazareth who listen to Jesus, and then say crossly, "Is this not Joseph's son?" As if that makes it clear that he ought to know better than say the things he says and do the things he does.

Today is Joseph's day. Once every three years, the lectionary for Advent gives us his shining moment. You heard the pained musings of a very young, very troubled man in the reading done by Jonathan Ali. (*Attached.*) Daily, Mary would grow rounder, her condition more obvious. He did not wish to disgrace his betrothed by publicly rejecting her and disowning her child. Nor did he want to see Mary stoned to death for adultery according to Jewish law.

Instead, he was contemplating quietly letting her go. The morality and the law of their time told Joseph that he must distance himself from Mary's soon-to-be-too-obvious sin and break their covenant of engagement. But God had other plans. God often has other plans! The scriptures are full of people whose plans God interrupted so that God's purpose might be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah could have lived their whole life in the relative comfort of Haran if God had not called them to go to a new land. Moses and Miriam could have remained quietly tending flocks in Midian if God had not said, "Go and rescue my people."

Matthew tells us that God's plan must overrule the honest and honorable fears of this righteous servant, Joseph. God's purpose demanded another course of action. Listen.

"But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

In Matthew's telling, Joseph was about to discover that he was righteous enough to disobey the law – when God commanded him to do so. Did you catch that? Joseph was *righteous enough to disobey* the law *when God commanded* him to do so. The scripture pivots on this startling irony.

Joseph was clearly a devout man. All his life he heard the words of the prophet Isaiah, read in his synagogue. Now they echoed in his ears.

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

Joseph – and early believers in Jesus – detected in these remembered words of Isaiah a message for the future that the prophet, and Ahaz, his king, could never have imagined. This echo of Isaiah's prophecy added credibility to Joseph's night vision. And complicated his deciding. It gave Mary's pregnancy a meaning beyond Joseph's moral struggle. Joseph was beginning to comprehend that this child was the fulfillment of Isaiah's long ago promise.

"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,'"

Emmanuel. It literally means God with us. That had always been the promise. Now Joseph was beginning to glimpse the fulfillment of this promise in the unborn child he would raise as his son. All his life he had known that God acted on the margins of history, from Haran, to Midian. Now it was happening in tiny Nazareth.

Joseph was challenged to a different, a riskier kind of faithfulness beyond the normal life of his synagogue. He heard God's voice booming out of the scriptures, from the writings of the prophet, not from the law with all its proscriptions and prohibitions. Joseph's dream, his angelic messenger, and the echoed voice of the prophet all agreed. Joseph was told that faithfulness to God included being faithful to Mary. He was *commanded* to take his pregnant fiancé into his home as his wife, and to give her unborn child his protection, his name, and his lineage.

Their life could not be an easy one. Joseph's reputation was almost certainly scarred. Now he could look forward to the typical small town gossip, "You know how it is, boys will be boys!" Or the other version, "You know how kids are these days, they just couldn't wait!"

Over and over through the centuries God has called people to tasks that would risk their reputations, that would separate them from friends and neighbors. If Martin Luther King, Jr. hadn't had a dream that drove him to challenge long accepted laws, he might have aged gracefully and quietly. If Bishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador had stuck to "the gospel" as his nation's leaders understood it, he would never have been machine gunned into heaven while saying mass. If discipleship were as easy as some of the recipes common in our culture, we would never have needed a savior. But the simple truth is that we do.

We can learn important lessons from Joseph. But they will not all be easy, or inspiring, or fun. Challenging calls to faithful, responsible discipleship often appear on the margins of life, where it is all too easy to miss them. But we may expect them to appear wherever people are separated by race, or class, or lifestyle. We may even require some intervention, like Joseph's dream, for God to get our attention. The choice may be personal as it was for Joseph. Or it may be centered in community life as it was for Dr. King and Archbishop Romero.

We begin to discern God's call to risky faithfulness when our hearts are stirred by grim stories of violence. Like school children being gunned into heaven. Or when we find our comfortable life challenged in the faces of the hungry, the homeless, the unemployed and the underemployed. When God's call comes into focus, discerning our path may well challenge our certainty just as it did Joseph's morality. For us, as for saintly Joseph, it will be the presence of the Holy One in our lives that will empower us to make the needed choices, sometimes against our better judgment.

Tuesday evening the yearly cycle of the holy story finally arrives in Bethlehem. The manger is waiting. When Joseph's child is born, the last candle will burn. The world will have the long awaited light at its center. And we shall call his name Emmanuel. God with us. It is God's faithfulness we are preparing to celebrate. When Advent is over, you will not be done. Christmas is only the beginning point for the next chapters of your faith journey. Faithful discipleship takes a lifetime. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Joseph's Wondering

My name is Joseph bar Jacob. You would call it Jacobson.
Maybe you expected me to be older.
But, you see, I've been considered an adult since my bar-mitzvah.
That was when I was twelve.
And I have worked for several years as a carpenter.

The woman in my life is also very young.
Her name is Mary. We were planning to be married soon.
But something has happened, and I really don't know what to do.
She's going to have a baby, and I am sure it isn't mine.
I come from a very good family.
King David was my ancestor. And Solomon, and all the kings of Judah.
How could I marry a woman already pregnant?

I was looking for a way to quietly end our engagement.
There is no easy way.
If I am not careful, Mary could be stoned to death for what she has done.
And I have to protect myself, too.
Everyone will believe I am the father, no matter what I might say.

And then I had that dream. It was something!
Here was a messenger from God,
you would say an angel, calling me by name.
“Joseph, son of David....” *(pause)*
But it's the message that haunts me.
“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

I'm not sure I believe it yet.
Dreams like that are for important prophets, not poor carpenters.

This decision is so big. And so important.
I dare not make it alone. I need help.
(Looks up.)
Master of the Universe, what shall I do?
Shall I take Mary and believe the dream, or quietly send her away?
If you will show me, I will be faithful. Amen.

Samuel B. Adams