December 22, 2013 – 4 Advent

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For the past four weeks, we’ve been on a journey. A sort of a backwards journey through time. It started out with the apocalypse, the end times, moved through the announcement of the coming of the savior to bring salvation and the kingdom, and finally to the birth of that savior. It was also a movement of focus, kind of like the effect you see in movies sometimes, where you start out in outer space and move inward until you end up in a very specific location in a neighborhood in a city. On this journey, we started out with the establishment of the whole universe as the kingdom of God, then moved into Israel with John the Baptist, and finally we end up narrowly focused on a stable in a small town near Jerusalem.

And we’re almost there! A couple more days of preparation, and then we get to celebrate! But before that day, we have today’s Gospel to consider, where we find Joseph on the horns of a dilemma. Of the four canonical Gospels, only two, Matthew and Luke, contain stories of the birth of Jesus. Luke’s version focuses on Mary and her reaction to the news that she would be carrying the world’s savior.

Matthew’s version, however, focuses on Joseph.

We don’t hear a lot about Joseph in general in the Gospels, and most of what we do hear is in Matthew’s Gospel. Joseph doesn’t appear at all in Mark, and only appears once in passing in John. And then he disappears completely in both Luke and Matthew after Jesus’ presentation at the Temple. So most everything we know about Joseph comes from this single story in Matthew of the birth of Jesus.

As I said, he’s on the horns of a dilemma, and he has a terrible decision to make. The girl he is betrothed to is pregnant, and he’s not the father. First of all, it’s necessary to understand the nature of betrothal in 1st century Palestine. It was much more than the marching band spelling out “Will you marry me?” and a kiss on the Jumbotron. It was more than a flash mob singing and dancing as the groom-to-be gets down on one knee with a diamond ring held out to his joyfully sobbing girlfriend. It was even more than the traditional asking the bride-to-be’s father for her hand in marriage, although that was part of it.

Jewish marriage consisted of two parts. The first part was the betrothal, where the fathers of the bride and groom made a formal and legal contract of marriage. These marriages were always arranged, and didn’t take the women’s opinion into account at all. The second part was the marriage feast, which took place sometimes as much as a year later, after which the groom took the bride home with him.

It’s between these two parts of Mary and Joseph’s marriage that this drama is unfolding. The text says that Joseph had planned to dismiss Mary quietly because he was a righteous man and wasn’t willing to expose her to public disgrace.

The word for dismiss here is *apoluo*, which really means to divorce or get rid of. The betrothal contract meant that the couple was essentially legally married, and it was something that could only be broken by divorce. And Joseph had cause to divorce Mary, at least in the eyes of the law. We can understand how he might think that she became pregnant in the usual fashion, which would mean that she had committed adultery since they were already in effect married.

But the Gospel gives us a rare glimpse of Joseph the man and says that, being a righteous man, he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace. This must have come as a bit of a surprise to Matthew’s largely Jewish audience, because normally righteousness would have been associated with strict adherence to the Torah, not with being kind to someone who has betrayed you. And adherence to the law would have virtually required him to set Mary, and her unborn baby, aside, even if she wasn’t stoned for adultery. Her reputation or feelings didn’t matter at all to the law.

So Joseph was a kind man. But even so, he is set on divorcing Mary according to his rights under the Torah, until he hears from an angel in a dream. And he immediately obeys, rather than passing it off as a bit of undigested beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, or a fragment of an underdone potato, to quote Ebenezer Scrooge. He doesn’t question this strange revelation, but immediately acts on it, or rather, refuses to act on the law. He had faith that this message was from God.

So Joseph was a faithful man. He was faithful in the way of Abraham and Moses, who followed God without question. He was faithful in the way of the Old Testament prophets, who proclaimed the will of God fearlessly. He was the precursor in faith of the shepherds and kings, of John the Baptist, and of the disciples. Joseph is described as righteous – [*dikaios*](http://biblehub.com/greek/dikaios_1342.htm) – but it was this faithfulness that made him righteous, not his adherence to Jewish law.

So he listened to the word of God and made the decision to keep Mary with him and raise her child as his son. Can you imagine what would have happened if he hadn’t made that choice? This is a pivotal point in Matthew’s whole incarnation story, and it depends upon a fallible, and no doubt confused, human being.

A human being who is just like us. Because ultimately the incarnation is a human story. Emmanuel – God With Us. God as one of us. It’s our story. Joseph was no more, or less, equipped to be a saint than we are. His faith enabled him to hear God’s word and to act upon that word without pause, but so could our faith.

How many times have you heard God speaking to you, perhaps in dreams like Joseph did, or through a conversation with someone, or through the words of a book, or EVEN in a sermon?

What has been your reaction? Have you acted without question on what God has told you to do? It’s not as easy as it sounds, I think. We are conditioned to think things through, to weigh options, to act practically. To do otherwise is considered rash or foolish or crazy. We’re supposed to be ants, not grasshoppers.

But God isn’t interested in our rational practicality. He’s interested in our faithfulness. However, letting go of our need to control our lives and our actions is a scary prospect. Believe me, I know. When I first heard God’s call to me to become a priest, miraculously for once in my life I didn’t question it or second guess myself. But that didn’t stop me from worrying that my friends and family would think I was nuts (and some of them did). And I was following blind, trusting in God to show me the way step by step. It’s a scary prospect, as I said.

So as we approach the final stop in our Advent journey, Bethlehem, think about Joseph. Think of his fears and uncertainties, and his faithful response to God, especially in the light of your own fears and uncertainties, and what God might be asking you to do.

Think of his extraordinary kindness to Mary and act with that same kindness to everyone you meet, whether they “deserve” it or not. And prepare to embrace this little child as your own, as he did. We could have worse examples to follow.

Amen.