

A Man of Integrity – Advent IV – 2019

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who is Yet to come. PBS

In our readings today we hear first from the Prophet Isaiah. He writes "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". (Isaiah 7.14, NRSV) Note, the phrase used is young woman, not virgin. The Hebrew word used is *Almah בתולה*, and is translated as both young woman and virgin. The definition we understand for virgin is not the same as it was in biblical times. In those days virgin meant any young woman, maid or maiden.

In the Psalm today God is rebuking the people of Israel for misunderstanding what their purpose is. The psalmist pleads "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" (Psalm 80.3-4, NRSV) God wants the chosen, which is all of us, to give of everything we have. God wants us to put God first, not give God what is left over.

The epistle today is the salutation of Paul's letter to the Church in Rome and is a long run-on sentence. It tells us of Paul's credentials and further names the people of Rome as Saints. Nowadays if we're writing a letter we generally begin "Dear People of Rome".

The Gospel today speaks of an encounter between Mary and Joseph. We do not know too much about Joseph. He appears only in Matthew and Luke's Gospel by name. He does not factor into Mark's or John's Gospel other than as Mary's husband. That's an unusual turn of speech. Usually it's the "wife" who is not named.

In the scene today, Mary has told Joseph that she is expecting God's child. She told him an angel came to see her and that she would be "with child" but not Joseph's child. Of course this did not make Joseph happy. He was a well-respected carpenter and generally considered a man of great integrity, both in business and in his life.

There's an interesting turn of phrase in the gospel. It says "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." (Matthew 1.19, NRSV) The laws of the day would have permitted Joseph to publicly shame Mary as being pregnant with another's child and she could, in fact, be stoned to death. Yet Joseph, had decided to dismiss her quietly rather than publicly shame her. In today's society this would be the same sort of thing as Joseph buying her a bus ticket to Calgary to start a new life away from Fernie.

Angels are important figures in Joseph's life and ministry. He is visited by Gabriel, the same angel who visited Mary, and is told that his love Mary will conceive and bear a son whose name shall be Jesus. And Joseph does this. He stays with Mary. He raises God's son as his own and he teaches Jesus to be a carpenter. Just in case this ministry thing doesn't work out, it's good to have a trade to fall back on.

Joseph is visited again by an angel just after Jesus is born and he's told to take his family and flee to Egypt as Herod wants to kill the baby. Joseph takes the angels advice, once again, and they flee to Egypt. Once Herod dies, an angel visits Joseph again and they return to a home in Nazareth.

The last appearance of Joseph is when he and Mary and Jesus are travelling to the Passover feast and on the way back realise Jesus is not with them. They walk back and find Jesus in the temple with the elders speaking of the things to come. When they rebuke 12 year old Jesus he replies in a similar way to any pre-teen. "I'm here in my father's house doing my father's work".

And they return home to Nazareth with Jesus in tow.

We do not know when Joseph dies. It is likely he died before Jesus earthly ministry began, which we believe to have been about age 30.

Given the belief that Joseph was quite a bit older than Mary this would make sense. It is also believed that Joseph and Mary went on to have four sons as well as unnumbered and unnamed daughters.

Joseph is venerated in the Church as a man of great integrity. He loved the woman to whom he was engaged and was expecting a son that was not his. He chose to remain with her and raise the child as his own son. He taught Jesus how to be a carpenter and to learn the laws of Moses. He raised Jesus as a Nazarene, the same as he had been raised.

Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem to be counted as was commanded and remained with her as she gave birth. According to custom, Joseph would not be allowed to be with Mary when she gave birth as she would be considered unclean, yet as she gave birth in less than ideal circumstances it is appropriate to assume that he was with her and supported her as a 21st century spouse would do, rather than staying outside the home while the women of the community attended to her.

He put his family before the strictest letter of the laws of the day. Integrity is defined as "the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles" (Oxford English dictionary). Joseph was upright and honest, in both trade and in family life. He was a good partner for Mary as he supported her as "Theotokos" or God-bearer.

A lesser man, faced with the prospect of his partner being pregnant with another's child would be ashamed and dismiss her.

That this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit would not have made much of a difference to most men, they would not stay around to see how it turned out. If Mary was lucky she'd be sent away quietly. If she was not fortunate, she'd be stoned to death for humiliating her partner.

If Joseph were a lesser man, when visited by an angel, would dismiss the message as simply a dream. This could have then resulted in Mary's abandonment or later after the second visit, in Jesus' death at the hands of Herod's men.

But Joseph did neither of these things. At first, he didn't believe Mary. Then, once her story was verified by an angel he returned to her and made everything better. He stood with her, took her to Bethlehem as his wife and was with her when she gave birth.

He raised that child as his own. Joseph is the patron saint of workers, of Canada, and of a happy death as it is believed he died in Mary's arms. His patronage date is the 19th of March and as this date traditionally occurs during Lent no meat is consumed in celebration. However, limes, cookies, pastries and food containing breadcrumbs are made and enjoyed. Why breadcrumbs? To symbolise sawdust, of course.

Outside Holy Family Catholic Church in Fernie there is a statue of the Holy Family. Depicted are Joseph, Mary and infant Jesus. In many paintings and statues of the Holy Family Joseph is depicted holding the baby. How wonderful, in a day and age when children were not considered of much value, that Joseph is holding and tending to him.

Recently I've been looking at art depicting the Holy Family. Most often you'll see Baby Jesus held by Mary and the two of them held by Joseph. A beautiful way to recognise an incredibly important family. Not a traditional definition of family as Jesus has two fathers; one Earthly and one Heavenly. Yet a beautiful family depicted in statuary and in art, through the centuries.

And as we prepare for the birth of Jesus...which we have experienced many times before; As we prepare for the coming again of Jesus; of His return, which we hope for; let us remember the role of Joseph in this incredibly important story. Mary is the God-bearer, she is the Light-bearer. She is the young woman chosen by God. And Joseph is also chosen by God to support Mary. A job he does quite well.

As we conclude Advent, the season of anticipation and expectation, let us give thanks for those who have supported us, both within and in addition to our families. Be it family friends, aunties, uncles, cousins or family of choice, let us give thanks for those who have helped shape us into the fabulous followers of Jesus we are today.

Let all God's children say Amen!

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Advent IV

Isaiah 7.10-17

Psalm 80

Romans 1.1-7

Matthew 1.18-25