

Christmas 2, Year A

December 29, 2013

St. Stephen's Church, Belvedere

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Merry 5th Day of Christmas! The season of Christmas is 12 days in the church calendar. I urge you to keep the relaxation, decorations, sociability, and celebration going as long as you can...it gets hard after New Year's Day. The season lasts until January 5: The day before Epiphany, January 6.

Today's gospel brings up another side of the Christmas story. As the privileged class, we experience Christmas as glowing decorations including a magnificent tree; feasting and presents; a warm glow of relaxation and beautiful carols and music, as well as the gathering of friends and family.

For millions and millions of people Christmas is a different experience. Today is the feast of the Holy Family in the Roman Catholic church and millions of families experience Christmas the Holy Family did: Oppressed by cruel dictators, as refugees or homeless, living in poverty.

We see Christmas today through the lens of Joseph, who undergoes almost constant change, movement, and even flight while at the same time trusting God and believing past hope that a way will open.

I identify with Joseph: Dutiful, quiet, always to do the right thing, hard working rarely in the spotlight and just as happy that way.

What a journey Joseph has: First, he finds out that the lovely girl, Mary from the finest family, to whom he has become betrothed, has become pregnant out of wedlock. Then, following a visit by an angel in a dream, he decides to do the right thing and remain with her and bear with dignity the shame and ridicule which will no doubt follow. He takes Mary as his wife and the baby as his own. Then he is informed by the government that he must travel 80 miles by foot with a near-term pregnant Mary to get to Bethlehem, his family home, for a stupid census.

Once there, despite his best efforts, he can't find a decent place for her to give birth. Then, thanks be to God he finally gets some degree of good news, when he and Mary are blessed by a sympathetic innkeeper who provides shelter among the warmth of the animals for the birth of the baby.

Once the birth is successfully accomplished, there are a few moments of welcome relief and rest and encouragement while the shepherds and angels and Wise Men adore the baby. Then angel visits him once again in a dream. He must have hated to go to sleep at this point in the story.

The angel tells him this time he must travel to Egypt, this time 300 miles by foot. The story of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus on this journey to Egypt is a lost story of adventure and courage.

After two years in Egypt, the angel appears again and tells Joseph to return to Israel, but when he gets there he has to move on to Galilee to avoid the new ruler, Archelaus who is known for being cruel and incompetent, even more than Herod the Great. Finally gets to go home. One of the things I love about this story is that the end of the story is home. Just to be able to go home. I love to be at home and I can only imagine how glad Joseph and Mary were to be at home with their young son.

Who exactly was Joseph? He is the devoted husband of Mary and the trusted and guardian of God's vulnerable baby son Jesus, but he is never given a voice and never mentioned again. The usual conception of Joseph is that of an older man, a safe protector, a carpenter, a chaste, holy, humble quiet man. He is the patron saint of manual laborers, and is a symbol of anonymous virtue, humility incarnate.

What can we learn from this text? Partly it is symbolic: The Joseph of the Christmas story is clearly reminiscent of the Joseph of the many-colored coat of the Exodus story. He too has a dream, he too goes to Egypt, he too saves the family. But the Joseph of the Christmas story is very different and presents his own story. He is an upright man, conformed to the Law of God, the standard of holiness who does what God has asked with faithfulness.

He does three things that are not so evident: First, Joseph teaches us to live faithfully while at the same time being open to dreams and revelations which can break in unexpectedly, revealing a mystery, which may take us on a journey. He invites us to be willing to listen to ephemeral whispers and inclinations; to revelations from an angel in a dream; and to be bold and to go on adventures.

Second, the journey to which we are called, the one that is our vocation, is not always easy. This is important: It may be very hard. We see this in Jesus: Our journey with God may be very very difficult. A call and a vocation often bring hardship.

Third, Joseph show how a person can be a pious believer, deeply faithful to everything within his religious tradition, yet at the same time be full of doubt. What is instructive about Joseph is that he seems to be completely open to a mystery beyond his understanding which breaks apart his world. No doubt there were many times when Joseph was full of doubt about what was going on, all the fearful circumstances and uncertainty. But he kept going on in faith.

Many Jews at the time the gospels were written did not know how to incorporate Jesus into the religious story, into the rich and deep tradition they knew. This can be a question for many of us today. We sometimes don't know how to integrate Jesus into our spiritual and religious framework. We have doubts.

How does one deal with the fantastic stories and amazing tales of Jesus and his disciples? Do we understand how God has broken into human history and perhaps even into our own lives? Joseph can be our example: He trusted God while living with doubt and kept on walking. We call this mystery. We keep on walking in faith with things beyond our ken. We live by grace with doubt.....and we call it living in the mystery.