

Advent 4A 2022

From what we know about Jesus' life, from birth to death roughly thirty-three years later, it seems that little of it was easy.

Christ could have incarnated as a prince anywhere in the world at any time, but instead, he was conceived by a working class woman who knew for a fact that her betrothed was not the father.

Why would Christ have incarnated into such a challenging, even dangerous situation?

For Mary's offense, Joseph could have denounced her publicly.

Though it was not actually a common practice by Mary's time, the penalty for adultery was officially stoning.

(Remember the woman caught in the act of adultery whom the scribes and pharisees brought before Jesus, and he replied, "Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone"?)

Perhaps Mary would not have been stoned, but, had it been made known to the community that the baby was not Joseph's, at the very least, she would have been sent back to her family to remain an economic burden without prospects.

Joseph, being a righteous man, was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace.

As he discerned what to do, he initially determined to dismiss her quietly in order to protect himself and her.

Perhaps this potential course of action did not grant him peace in his heart, but he could conceive of nothing else.

Then God stepped in.

God appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to marry Mary.

What seems like a destructive mistake on her part, God explains, was actually set in motion by the Holy Spirit.

Joseph listens to the voice of God in the dream and decides to do what most would say is foolish.

He marries Mary.

In life, what appears to be an accident, a disaster, a mistake is sometimes the work of the Spirit.

That is why we must do our best and let it go.

We can certainly learn for the future, but need not beat ourselves up about the past.

Forgiveness starts at home.

Notice that Joseph did not immediately know what to do.

He had to discern, to process events, and make up his mind.

He then had to change course as new information was granted him.

In life, we grope forward, we process, we struggle, we wrestle with ideas, and all of this makes us stronger, wiser, more capable.

Processing, struggling is part of the sacred path.

The path to God is not easy, but is filled with switchbacks, obstacles, dark places, and quicksand.

Beware of those people who think they have everything figured out in advance.

Not struggling is not the point.

It is not a sign of success.

Navigating life with faith and determination, love and grace is.

To be a Christian is to be always developing, always listening, always open to surprises.

Each challenge teaches us humility, as Joseph demonstrated when he humbly assented to God's will once he recognized it.

Humility opens us to the support of others, just as Mary depended upon Joseph's support.

We must not only give help, in other words, but allow ourselves to be helped.

That is how we open our hearts to others.

Through Jesus' birth, moreover, we are taught to value God over worldly matters, as Joseph valued God's direction over worldly concerns.

We must not mistake classroom earth for the goal of existence.

We are here only to learn and to leave, which is why we say that this world is not our home.

The birth of Jesus to Mary also demonstrates that God's logic does not follow our logic.

Discernment of God's will is more a matter of the heart than it is about logic.

We continue discerning until the heart settles on something in peace.

God's reasoning is much more comprehensive than ours.

We see only a limited amount and determine our next steps unaware of most of what is.

Joseph could not really have understood what "he will save his people from their sins" meant concretely.

It sounds like a tall order for a carpenter's son.

I wonder whether he ever came to a full understanding of how significant his choice was.

Joseph is not mentioned in connection with Jesus' adult life.

Many assume that he died before Jesus began his ministry.

We are not promised in this life that we will see the good that we have helped to bring about.

There is no George Bailey experience.

Only God can see everything and know what needs to happen to guarantee a certain result, to bring about growth.

I am reminded of the disciples' question to Jesus about the blind man.

Was he born blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned?

Jesus teaches them that the man was born blind so that the glory of God might be revealed in his healing.

There is a lesson for someone in everything God does, but that lesson might be bigger than we can see.

I feel certain that most of you can recall events in your lives that seemed catastrophic at the time, but in retrospect, had meaningful consequences for your lives.

Some get lost in arguing whether or not the Holy Spirit directly impregnated Mary, or someone else did, perhaps motivated by the Holy Spirit.

I say, it does not really matter.

Whatever happened, the Holy Spirit was directing events.

That is what matters.

Some will say, "But if someone else did it, Mary could not be a virgin."

Well, if God can impregnate, God can preserve the virginity of one who is impregnated.

God is fully capable.

That being said, believing that Mary was a literal virgin is not required to be in good standing with God.

Having trust that God is in charge and is working through earthly events to form us, to help us to grow, on the other hand, is crucial.

As we face each event, we must discern what to do.

We must process, in trust, what is best, and know that what God thinks is best is not necessarily what society thinks is best.

As I said, Christ could have incarnated anywhere, anytime, as anyone.

I suspect that Christ knew that if the incarnation was a prince, the lesson people learned would be to seek worldly perfection and achievement.

Christ instead incarnated as a poor child in difficult circumstances in order to shift the focus from perfection and achievement to grace, process, and love.

Joseph carefully processed his situation, and what he did was a gracious, loving act.

Mary and Joseph's behavior with respect to the pregnancy show us how to open our hearts to God.

Christ knew they were the right people by whom to incarnate.