

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, the lectionary usually points its focus upon Mary, the soon-to-be mother of Jesus. Mary...at this point of time in scripture...is presented to us in a very human and personal way. Can **you** think of a better way for God to reach us about his Incarnation...his being with us as one of us? What better way than to be seen as a little baby, just one of the children held by the billions of mothers across the history of the earth?

Nope. There is **every** reason..on this last Sunday in Advent...to reflect on the wonderful story of Mary, the mother of Jesus.....except....

The gospel's focus this day...in Year A of the lectionary..is upon **Joseph**.

We are not used to this. The Christmas story in church is usually St. Luke's version. You know, the one with the shepherds kneeling at the manger, sheep illuminated by all the heavenly host. The spotlight shines on Mary and the baby. Joseph is there too, of course. But, in the standard Christmas pageant, Joseph usually does not get any speaking lines, unless he gets to ask for room at the inn, or to ask "Please, do you have somewhere my very pregnant wife can lay down?"

But, here in Matthew, we get the Christmas story from the point of view of the father. Well, not the "father" exactly. Or is he? Which is the REAL story here.

It is high time for we, the faithful living in the 21st century world, to refocus on this miracle story.

You know, we are challenged to be creative in being the people of Christ in the 21st century...and this parish is trying to do that in many different ways. It is not politically, or even socially correct to ask this question. But, is not it really the fundamental question that we...and everyone else in 2016...joins with Joseph in asking of the baby Jesus: "**Who's your daddy?**"

We smile a bit. Seems somewhat funny, at first. But, in the urban street culture of today, that question is actually scandalous. If any of you were asked that question in a more taunting, or direct way, it would be an insult to you.

Calling into question your mother's virtue. Her faithfulness. Suggesting she was promiscuous.

But that is what he naturally thinks when he hears...hears that the woman he is engaged to is pregnant, and he is not the father, he assumes what any normal person would: Mary has been unfaithful to him. What would you think in his place...hearing your bride-to-be is pregnant?

If it was me, I would be devastated. But, in today's culture, it would be considered normal to cut my losses, and dump "no-good" Mary for the tramp that she is.

Let us face it. It would be embarrassing for a while with friends and family, but cheating on your betrothed is the hum-drum stuff of day-time TV. In 2016, you just get over it and move on.

But for Joseph? How much worse could it get? Think of it. 2000 years ago, in Palestine, Mary's pregnant condition before being married was a scandal beyond our comprehension. This scripture treats his options gently. But, through historical research, we know the truth. Under Jewish law and the culture of the times, he could...and probably should, have called her out into the public...to be stoned to death. Both her and her unborn child.

Not too many years ago, there was a movie called, simply, "The Nativity"....bringing to very real life, on the big movie screen, the entire story of the birth of Jesus. Which included the initial outrage, the crushing, broken heart that Joseph felt.

So, in addition, there is the story between the lines of scripture. Use your imagination. In his grief and despair on learning of her pregnancy by somebody else, he is beside himself. In tears over his crushed love, he sobs....or screams...or implores her, "What happened?" "Who was it?" "How could you?"

And, as if that all was not enough, she answers him....again in the story between the lines of scripture, "I did not cheat on you. I am a virgin still." And, she proceeds to tell him the story we know so well, "I am carrying the child of God."

Whoa. What? In Joseph's mind, this story is now extraordinary. Literally unbelievable, even at that time, forgetting about how it would float today. Just when you thought that the excuse of telling the teacher, "My dog ate my homework!" was extreme, Mary's story of being impregnated by God is over the top. Takes first prize.

Joseph must have thought she was out of her mind, or was further humiliating him by insulting his intelligence with this excuse. But he was not alone.

Just a few hundred years ago, the Emperor of China was told that the "foreign devils" from the West were converting the Chinese people to their faith. He asked what the missionaries proclaimed. When he was told of the man from Nazareth who was born from the Virgin, who suffered and died on the cross, the Emperor said: "Leave them alone. Who in his right mind would believe such a crazy story?"

Those are the very words Joseph whispered to himself. "Who is his right mind would believe such a crazy story?" The same words used, more than ever in this post-modern world, to describe this story.

In fact, the Incarnation of God in Jesus, as the Christ, is both a mystery and a miracle. If we try to explain the virgin birth, we would lose our reason. But, if we discredit it altogether, we would lose our souls. True faith is beyond reason, and belongs to the fourth dimension that cannot be measured by time or space. True faith rests on the declared fact that Christ was "conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary."

But, in hitting the issue straight on, the story of the virgin birth of Jesus is one of the basic points of controversy that we Christians face today. Today's world and culture can dismiss outright the proclamation of the gospels on that level alone. But, focusing on a debate between believers and non-believers over the modern, scientific probabilities of a virgin birth misses the point completely.

Think about it.

Instead, St. Matthew's gospel reading today focuses on:

1. Joseph's faith, during the greatest emotional pain of his life, to receive God's peace;
2. When hurting the most, he listens to what God tells his heart;
3. Most of all, his faith is put into action. He reacts to God's call to him and becomes this child's father figure and supports his wife.

The rocks he would throw at her until her death, he drops from his hand. The pain and doubt he carries in heart he drops as well, all out of the love for Mary, and his God. Joseph, in finding the inner strength and peace of God, finds in God the grace to forgive...and love...and act.

In 2016, we can thank God for this story from Matthew, and its focus on Joseph. Read it again. In your imagination, put yourself in the place of Joseph. Honestly, can you think of a more potent, more powerful, more realistically relevant and insightful miracle...a true miracle...of the transformation of Joseph. A man crushed in his heart by this almost certain betrayal and subsequently unbelievable lie of an alibi...emotions of pain and loss that are conquered by his love for her, his trust in her word, and his healing faith in his God.

Really. My heart goes out to him. It is no wonder these parents nurtured such a child.

Who is your daddy, baby Jesus? Perhaps not Joseph, but you could have done far worse.

Across all time, we are blessed to see and learn yet another meaning of the miracle of the virgin birth...as Joseph's example of love and reconciliation leads us to further understand how our lives can be lived. In the very same way, finding peace and relief in the very presence of God: in the Father, and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Amen.