

Advent 4

Isaiah 7: 10-16; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-25

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Trust

How often have you woken in the morning and remembered a dream. Or even remembered that a dream has left you feeling 'odd' or 'uncomfortable' but you can't remember what the dream was about or what it was that has left you with this feeling. So which of these feelings do you think Joseph woke with? An odd feeling or an uncomfortable one? And was this odd or uncomfortable feeling because of what he had planned to do or because of what he is now going to do. He is now going to remain engaged to Mary, he is going to accept the child she is carrying as his, he will, once she has given birth, take her as his wife. This is something significant. In the culture of the day, engagement was a big deal, it was a very serious contract, and if that engagement is to be broken, it requires a formal divorce. We are told that Joseph is a righteous man, but how do we reconcile his righteousness with his decision to 'dismiss her quietly'. The honour code in the Mediterranean world says that no one may take what belongs to another person. Mary's child is not Joseph's, so he is hesitant in taking it. Mary, as a girl engaged to Joseph, is legally united with Joseph in every way except they do not yet live under the same roof. To all intents and purposes, Mary and Joseph are a couple, and all that is yet to occur is for Joseph to take Mary home as his wife. Now that she is pregnant, that arrangement is in serious jeopardy and Joseph is entitled to return Mary to her father. By leniently divorcing Mary, Joseph is allowing the rightful father to claim the child and marry Mary. Joseph is acting honourably.

So what is it about the angel's visit to Joseph that convinces him not to dismiss Mary as his wife. We have to assume that Mary has already explained to Joseph that she has not been unfaithful, that an angel had appeared to her and told her she is to give birth to God's son. I mean, that's easy to understand, isn't it? You would believe a person if they told you that, wouldn't you??? So the angel appears to Joseph in his dream, and tells him the same story, and that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, that she has not been unfaithful to him, and that there is no shame in the fact that she is pregnant. But the angel tells him more than just that this child Mary is carrying is from the Holy Spirit. The angel gives Joseph a name to call the child. The child will be a son, and is to be called Jesus – Iesous (Greek) – which comes from the Hebrew Yehoshuah, which means 'Yahweh is salvation' or 'Yahweh saves'. Both Mary and Joseph are honourable people; God would not honour a shameful person.

But we are still left with the question, why did Joseph believe the dream, why did he 'take the word of an angel in a dream', and change his whole life plan. I think it comes down to something St. Ignatius of Loyola calls 'discernment'. Discernment is the examination of your internal reactions, the 'movements of the spirit', especially in prayer. These movements of the spirit come in many different ways, but occasionally, rarely, a person is left with a strong, yet gentle, feeling that their thoughts are not of their own imagination, they are 'of God'. The grace they receive makes it impossible for them to doubt their feelings, despite what their head says, they know in their heart it is the right decision. It may be easy to convince yourself that what your mind comes up with, or in the case of Joseph, what you have dreamed, is not you but God, but there is an easy way of testing whether it is your head or your heart, of 'discerning' whether they are 'of God' or not. Are they quiet? Do they lead toward God or away? What is the long-term

result? For Joseph, the answers to these questions would have affirmed that this 'angelic message' was 'of God'. It was a gentle message of assurance; Joseph was left with no doubts at the end of it (although doubt would have been very understandable). Joseph was an honourable man, he already had great trust in God's love, this trust was not challenged or damaged by the dream, the message he received from the angel fitted in with the design of Joseph's life with God. This is why he followed it.

Trust is a theme in our first reading as well. Not just Joseph is asked to trust God. In our reading from Isaiah, King Ahaz of Judah is surrounded on all sides, and Isaiah challenges him to trust God. Isaiah even suggests he 'ask God for a sign', to show that he will be under God's protection. Now Ahaz's answer about 'not wanting to put God to the test' may sound like the right response, after all we are told not to put God to the test. But Ahaz has another reason for not asking for a sign, he has already 'struck a deal' with some of his enemies in an attempt to ensure Judah's safety. The only trouble is, he has 'done a deal' with an enemy who doesn't think twice about 'double-crossing' him and Judah finds itself totally unprotected. Isaiah foretells of 'one who will be sent as a sign that God will always be with them'. Matthew quotes Isaiah in our Gospel, the ultimate good news, God will always be with us.

How hard is it for us to really believe that. How hard is it to truly believe that, no matter what is currently in front of us in our lives, God is always with us. God will be there with us, not necessarily to rescue us and protect us from hardship, because that is just not going to happen nor is it reasonable, but we are called to trust that even in that hardship, God is there with us, sitting in the ashes, swimming in the muck, ready to be leaned on or even ready to carry us when we are too weak to stand or walk ourselves. Joseph trusted God and took Mary and her child into his life.

Back in the early 90s there was a popular TV show called *Evening Shade*. Burt Reynolds starred as a football coach in small-town Arkansas, but the stories were mainly about the daily doings in his personal life, with his wife and kids and friends. One night, at the end of the show, his two primary school-aged children were ready for bed and were looking out the bedroom windows over the verandah and chatting. The little boy said, "Do you ever feel lonely and scared?" His sister replied, "Well, sometimes; but then I remember what they say in Sunday School, about how God is always with us and I feel better." The boy thought a few minutes – then he said, "Yeah, well, that praying stuff is all right I guess; but sometimes you just need somebody with some skin on them." Ahaz wanted someone 'with skin on' so he could feel confident that he would be safe. Even though Ahaz declined the sign, Isaiah gives him one 'look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel'. Name him 'God is with us'. Isaiah is offering Ahaz this 'someone with skin on'. Joseph was afraid, and the angel reassures him, 'do not be afraid' and gives him the same promise as the one given to Ahaz 'the child will be a sign of Emmanuel, of 'God with us' '. Sometimes we only feel confident when we too have 'someone with skin on'. Our calling today is to trust in the promise of God and not be afraid, not be afraid of the ordinary difficulties and disasters of life, not be afraid to stand for the Kingdom of God, not be afraid to take action on behalf of the marginalised, the distressed, the outcast of our society. Our calling is to be a sign of 'God with us' in the world. We are called to reach out into the world with the love of God, knowing that as we do so in Christ's name, we are the hands of Christ in the world. And when fear starts to grab hold of us again, if we find ourselves searching for that 'someone with skin on', may we remember that the church is the body of

Christ in the world. God is here in our midst, 'God is with us' in this place,
and in this life.