

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

December 23rd, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

The Power of Joseph
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Joseph is perhaps one of the more enigmatic characters of the canonical Gospels. He appears almost solely in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke and then mysteriously “checks out” of the story line by the time Jesus is a grown man. The harder I look at the passages about him, the more peculiar they become. We might think Joseph would be more important in Jesus’ life, passing along to him all the secrets of the carpentry trade, presumably even the household itself, the care of the family.

Yet, of all the family around Jesus, it is Mary who will come to the fore in the tradition. Almost powerless Mary, betrothed to Joseph in a classically arranged first-century marriage, and yet, as the tradition has her, the Mother of God. And Joseph will recede into the background of the story. Today’s Gospel reading shows him at his very best, and yet his involvement will be brief and truncated.

I kind of know how Joseph might have felt. Many fathers do. During Hiroko’s pregnancy, and even more-so as she gave birth, I was, at best, a supportive bystander. Maybe I was paying a lot of the bills, but who cares? What is writing a check when a new life is being knit together in the womb? What is it to push papers and write sermons when a miracle that pre-dates history is happening slowly and uncontrollably in your living room, and even with all that modern medicine has to offer, you have virtually no control in determining its outcome? We fathers might feel that perhaps after the child is born we have a little more influence over events. Well, it’s over four years later, and I’m still feeling as powerless as ever!

Joseph is startled to discover the woman betrothed to him is pregnant. Being a decent sort of man, he does what society might expect to preserve family honor – a quiet dismissal of a woman who was unable to retain her purity before marriage. Make no mistake, Joseph could have held on to his reputation, and might have even enhanced it by breaking off the engagement. It would have been the powerful thing to do, perfectly within his rights. It would have been the “manly” thing to do in his culture, where to be powerful and in control was what being a man meant.

We can argue the why’s and wherefore’s of angelic interventions, but Joseph’s decision to marry her anyway is probably among the riskiest things we ever see him doing. He’s just thrown his family honor on the line, his manly dignity might well become the fodder of gossip and icy stares. Indeed, his business, his livelihood might suffer from the impurity of it all.

Little does he know (ha! Like most of us guys. . .), these ought to be the least of his concerns about what his commitment to Mary and this child who is destined to “save his people from their sins” might mean.

The Prophet opens our readings today by asking King Ahaz if he desires a sign from God: Ahaz, yet another king in that long list of notorious rulers of ancient Judah. Like so many of his kin, Ahaz suffered from an over-inflated sense of power, self-serving tendencies, and rank idolatry. Ahaz excels at notoriety – so much so that after his death, his body is not even laid in the traditional resting place of kings.

In this rather cryptic text from Isaiah, Ahaz is fearful, for the King of Aram and Prince of Israel have recently united in an attempted overthrow of Jerusalem. When the Prophet offers a sign, Ahaz utters in a poetic, kingly way what we might shrink down in today’s vernacular this way: “No thanks!” Ahaz might be wicked, but he’s not stupid when it comes to God. Signs from God are profoundly dangerous, especially to kings, and when Prophets offer them, generally all bets are off.

So, as we might expect, the Prophet gives him one anyway! The Prophet tells King Ahaz in no uncertain terms that “Immanuel” – God with us – will not appear through any will or effort of the king or of any other temporal power. The appearance is the sign itself of the hubris of worldly kings. Indeed, the prophecy concludes with the chilling prediction that Judah will be empty before the child comes of age. Ahaz’

schemes will come to naught.

Of course, this is the passage containing the now immortal lines about a young woman, a virgin, conceiving. And since early Christian times, our spiritual ancestors were taught to hear it as a prediction of the Messiah, a sign enshrined in the Hebrew Scriptures pointing towards the coming of Christ.

And indeed, the virgin birth transcends time from the prophecy to the story of today's Gospel as a plaintive reminder to all that are powerful in this world that God does not act among us in ways of domination or control. For Mary to conceive without a man's action is not simply Christian tradition or some litmus test for orthodoxy, but a profound statement at how God touches the powerless. And when the powerless are touched by God, the only thing the usually powerful can do is just stand by and watch in awe, and perhaps tremble.

Indeed, when radical grace is promised and given, our role is very much like Joseph's – powerless at first, where the tried and trusted ways of dealing with the challenges of life no longer work and all is rendered truly impotent by God's action.

This is one of the great truths the Christmas story holds for us, especially as residents of Marin County. Powerlessness always belongs to someone else, not us. We are the powerful, those most able to help, with our qualifications, expertise, and sharp wits, we are the ones in charge. When something goes wrong, like good carpenters, we fix it. When something is awry or there's a problem too difficult, we solve it. We are the Ahaz's when we're bad and the Joseph's when we're good, and our plain, used-to-power selves when we're somewhere in between.

But God tells us through the incarnation that we are not in charge. None of us. And, indeed, most of us have confronted times in our lives when we have wilted out of fear, when the bottom has dropped out and we have been faced with awful vulnerability and all of our work to be in control seems a wreckage. That's where God's opening is in us. Where Immanuel can enter our lives and re-make them.

We might, in response, retreat as Ahaz did from humbling himself before a sign. Or we might, as Joseph did, throw everything on the line and let the power go and all bets truly be off. God is now in charge. . . . Either way, we are no longer in control, and that perhaps ought to terrify us more than edify us this time of year. And then it might inspire us to put down our power long enough to enter the transformation God offers us in Christ, in the bread and the wine, in the shared prayers and confessions of a general humility that we "go to church" in a culture that, broadly speaking, wants nothing at all to do with religion, organized or not. That our spirituality feels vulnerable to the jaundiced eye, and it might just make us a little less powerful than we would like.

Because at the end of the story of Christmas is this shocking image of a fragile child, this God, our God, joining the true nature we all share. And that "all" now includes God, who shirks the powers of this world as we all must sooner or later, for the sake of the truer power of compassion, a compassion that Joseph discovers in himself today, the sort of power that could restore the world to wholeness.

Amen.