

Year A: Advent 4b Is 7:10-16; Ps 80:1-7, 16-18; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:18-25
St. Barnabas, Florissant – December 22, 2019

Focus Sentence: After we see our own human condition in the Gospel, we shift to seeing that God always acts in human history through human agents.

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Matthew tells us that Joseph is a “just man,” a righteous man. Being a righteous man means that there are better than even chances that Joseph has obeyed his father and mother growing up, that he has learned to keep the family traditions, and that he has come to be soaked in the religious observances of his people.

The great deeds that the Lord had done for Israel would have been recounted to him repeatedly, so that at thirteen years and a day, Joseph has become a *bar-mitzvah*, a son of the commandment. From then on, he would be held to observing the Law, the prayers, and the fast days.

If Joseph were a less righteous young man, the news from Mary might not be so hard to take.

The date for the wedding had been set, the invitations picked out, and the guest list had been finalized. The caterer and florist had both been hired, and the synagogue was reserved for the big day. Aunts and uncles, and a whole multitude of cousins had their calendars marked for the trip. The groomsmen and bridesmaids were selected, and the presents had begun to trickle in. Even the travel agent had finalized the honeymoon details --- a trip to the coast of Sidon.

It had all the markings of a righteous wedding, by righteous people living by righteous values in a righteous community for all the right reasons. In spite of the wedding having been arranged by parents, Joseph and Mary were even very, very much in love with each other. ... and then.....

PAUSE

Mary asks if she and her mother can talk, away from Dad. Looking slightly puzzled, Mom agrees. Mom hears a story about an angel and about the Holy Spirit impregnating her, and Mom's first reaction is to call a psychiatrist. But, just to go along with her daughter's delusion, they go and buy a home pregnancy test kit --- and it turns out positive!

After receiving the family doctor's confirmation of the test results, Mom and Mary just hold each other and weep --- until Mom's anger kicks in.

"Just think of the public shame you've brought on our family! How could you have done this?!? And that rotten, no-good Joseph! How, after all the proper training, and all that your parents have done for both of you; how could you go and do something like this to your families? And then --- I can't believe it --- you try to blame it on God!!"

PAUSE

Joseph hurries over, shaken by the trembling in Mary's voice over the phone. He's aware of her pale look as she tells him to sit down, next to his future mother-in-law --- who now sits motionless, staring out the window.

He takes the news like a righteous man would. He suggests calling his attorney and having the whole thing annulled. His idea of "divorcing her quietly" takes shape in his suggestion that she visit a distant aunt near Jerusalem and have her illegitimate child away from the community where Joseph is trying to establish himself and his fledgling carpentry business. In a strange way, Joseph is trying to be "as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove."

Herb O'Driscoll, the eminent preaching scholar, and one of my favorite writers, constantly works to recover the drama of the stories in the Bible (which, admittedly, have become somewhat sterile and bland through years of repetition) by connecting them to the urgent realities of our own life stories.

In this morning's Gospel story, O'Driscoll sees the all-too-common situation of two teenagers in love, suddenly faced with the reality of a problem pregnancy.

And, if it's not bad enough to consider the results to be through an unfortunate mistake on their part, the young man has certainty that the baby is not his. How could the love of his life have done this to him?

When we can experience the biblical stories in this way, we can recover the wrenching drama and urgency that the writers have placed in them. And when we have recovered this drama and urgency, these stories can help us bring our own stories into the healing light of God's love.

PAUSE

But, back to our particular story. In the midst of the shock, in the midst of the tears and the anger and the numbing sense of disappointment, grace comes.

God may not always seem to be on time, at least not on our timeline, but grace is never late.

The angel Gabriel puts in another appearance --- this time to the wronged Joseph and tells Joseph that the same Spirit of God who moved over the chaos to initiate the first creation has likewise moved over his fiancée to impregnate her with the New Creation. The baby's name will be called "Yeshua," which means "God saves."

And, somehow, by this grace, Joseph sets aside his doubts and fears, and he believes the revelation enough to take the unmarried, pregnant Mary to be his wife. They won't have their big, fancy wedding, but they love one another in spite of their misunderstandings and frustrations ... which seems to reflect something of the Good News they are giving birth to as parents.

PAUSE

St. Paul will later write of the "scandal of the cross," which will be a stumbling block to both Jews and Gentiles. But, long before the "scandal of the cross" there was the "scandal of the crib." We prefer to gloss over the embarrassment of unmarried teens showing up pregnant, but that's exactly how Jesus' conception appeared to one and all. We prefer to think of angel messengers and miracles and a virgin birth, and to forget the messy human realities which confronted Mary and Joseph and their families.

But God continually surprises us by acting, NOT through our ideas of the miraculous, but always through those messy realities of human agency. And through this particular human agency comes *Emmanuel* --- *God with us* --- the ultimate reality and miracle of history.

God, becoming fully and completely human, cell by cell in Mary's womb, just as each one of us begins that same long journey toward becoming fully human.

God, fully human --- not against us. Not before us. Not behind us. Not around us. Not over us. Not beneath us. But a fully human GOD **WITH** US, delivering us from the power of human evil and death.

Now, come, O come, Jesus, our Emmanuel!

...Amen.