

St. James' Episcopal Church Cindy Baskin
Advent 4-A December 19, 2010
Texts: Is 7:10-17; Ps 24:1-7; Rom 1:1-7; Matt 1:18-25

Theme: The God Who Disrupts

Scripture: ^{1:24}*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him;*
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Today, on this the fourth Sunday of Advent, we hear Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. We will hear the more familiar rendition of this story – the one from Luke's gospel – on Christmas Eve. That's the one that some of you could narrate for memory. But in Matthew's gospel, we don't hear about shepherds out in a field, or angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest." We don't even hear much about Mary. Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth focuses on Joseph.

Joseph's whole life is about to be disrupted and turned upside-down by the God whom he worships. He is **betrothed** to the young Mary, but we would be in error to consider his betrothal as similar to our contemporary idea of engagement before marriage. In ancient Judaism, betrothal was the initial phase of the marriage process with its own ceremony and legal consequences. There was a betrothal ceremony, which usually took place at the bride's home, during which the husband-to-be would present the bride (and her father) with the marriage contract and the so-called bride-price. The bride then stayed in her father's house until the marriage ceremony. One or two years might separate the betrothal ceremony from the actual marriage ceremony, during which the bride moved from her father's house to that of the groom.

It's during this in-between-stage that we find Joseph and Mary in today's gospel. They have gone through the betrothal ceremony and they are considered married, but they have not yet consummated the marriage. Now Mary turns up pregnant and Joseph knows he's not the father!

It's not too difficult to imagine the emotional confusion and turmoil this situation must create for Joseph. His betrothed has committed adultery; he's been betrayed; and now he must make agonizing decisions. If Joseph follows the Jewish Law, he will make an issue of her pregnant condition with her father. At best, this will lead to disgrace and shame for Mary and her family. At worse, it could lead to her execution by stoning, the penalty dictated by the Jewish law for a woman who has committed adultery. Regardless, Mary's family is disgraced and Joseph himself is humiliated. What's a man to do?

Matthew tells us that Joseph is unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, so ultimately he decides on an alternative plan. He will divorce Mary as the Levitical Law directs, but he will do so **quietly**. Joseph has made his decision; he knows how he will move forward with his life despite Mary's agonizing betrayal.

But implementation of his decision is cut short by an angelic communication in a dream: "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*" "Do not be afraid"? What a strange thing for the angel to say! I would have expected something more along the lines of: "Joseph, I know you're angry, but . . .;" or "Joseph, no need to feel humiliated;" or something as simple as, "Joseph, listen up!" But "Joseph, do not be afraid"? Why would an angel need to tell Joseph not to be afraid?

If we think about it, there's a lot in these words from this angelic messenger that could generate fear in even the most stout-hearted of men. The very thought of dealing with the likely village scandal would cause most of us to tremble. Joseph probably also wonders if he will ever be able to trust Mary again; after all, if she's committed adultery once, will she do it again? And what about the loss of respect he will likely experience because of Mary's infidelity? One thing is clear, the impending birth of this child will create an incredible disruption to Joseph's world, hopes, and expectations – and that's a frightful thing. The angel is basically telling Joseph that this scandalous situation is really part of God's plan. A “problem pregnancy” with nine months of awkward explanations, all part of God's plan? Some plan!

Joseph now has a new decisions to make. Will he follow the directives of this angelic messenger and allow such a disruption to his life? Or will he proceed with his earlier plan? Will he go with what he knows and with what the Law says? Or will he trust and walk forward in faith?

We know of Joseph's response from Matthew's account: *When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.* Joseph thus emerges as a major figure for us during this Advent season. He is presented as a model of a person who allows God's word to direct his life, even when he doesn't know exactly where that will lead. Even in the midst of his own emotional upheaval, he chooses to follow God's calling. Joseph is open to God working through him to accomplish something new in human history.

What about us? This coming Friday is Christmas Eve – that time when we celebrate the in-breaking of God into our lives in the coming of Jesus. Joseph's story should prompt questions for us to reflect upon. Will we, like Joseph, welcome the in-breaking of God's power into our lives, despite the disruption to our assumptions and expectations? Will we actively respond to God's call despite our fear or questions or emotional confusion? I pray that during these days of celebration, we would indeed model Joseph's active response.