

Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 18, 2016 – Good Shepherd Parish

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying:

Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God;
let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!

But Ahaz answered,

"I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"

Then Isaiah said:

Listen, O house of David!

Is it not enough for you to weary people,
must you also weary my God?

Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign:
the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and shall name him Emmanuel.

Psalm: Ps 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

R. (7c and 10b) Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it.
For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?
or who may stand in his holy place?
One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,
who desires not what is vain.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,
a reward from God his savior.
Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about

the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.



A Prayer for Advent

Look on us, Jesus, and let all the darkness of our souls disappear before the beams of your brightness.

Fill us with your holy love, and open to us the treasures of your wisdom.

You know all our desire, so bring to perfection what you have started, and what the Holy Spirit has wakened us to ask in prayer.

We seek your face, turn your face to us and show us your glory. Then our longing will be satisfied and our peace will be perfect. Amen.

-St. Augustine of Hippo

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INVITATION TO PRAY

Pause for a few moments of silence and enter more deeply into the presence of God.

Proclaim the Scriptures out loud.

As you listen to the gospel be attentive to a word, a phrase, a question, an image, or a feeling that emerges. Reflect on this quietly or share it aloud.

INVITATION TO REFLECT

A dream changed Joseph's life—and ours (Gospel). A mere dream, like what you and I have every night. How trustworthy could this be? And yet the safety of Mary and the child Jesus and that of the whole world depended on it! In this dream, an angel told Joseph that Mary's pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit of God. Mary had accepted this readily but without really understanding. And the angel said that Joseph *should not be afraid* of the pregnancy, even though he had not yet even married this woman.

Joseph's dream was like the face of mother to an infant. It was like the voice of a close friend.

Not be afraid? Everyone could see that Joseph's fiancé was "in a family way." USA culture might applaud this fact, as it does when movie stars have children with whomever they please as often as they please. In Biblical culture, marriage was a sacred act, a participation in God's own fidelity, and it seemed that Mary had broken with that fidelity, at least as far as the townspeople could see. The Blessed Mother a public sinner! No wonder Joseph was making arrangements for a "quiet divorce." So why in the world would he reverse himself and trust a dream? Do you trust dreams? A friend of mine had one about a kangaroo sitting on the roof in a rocking chair smoking a pipe! Should my friend check the roof for rocking chairs, just in case? No. We take a dream for what it is; a mechanism of our psyche that somehow processes our experience but does not give us literal truth. We do not usually rely on them for life-changing messages. Why did Joseph? I think the answer has to do with something St. Ignatius of Loyola calls "discernment."

In general, discernment is an examination of one's internal reactions ("movements of spirit"), especially when they happen in prayer. There are many different movements, of course, but there is one that may describe Joseph's dream. Sometimes, rarely, grace is so gently strong that the person praying has an inner assurance that the experience did not come from imagination but from God. Somehow it is something impossible to doubt. You and I have to be careful not to get carried away by this notion. Probably many of us could convince ourselves that God or an angel spoke to us this morning. We need to "discern" which experiences are from God and which are not. Are they quiet? Do they lead toward God or away? What is the long-term result? A spiritual director could help us sort through such questions.

But I think Joseph's might have discerned his dream as coming from God. It contained—not a kangaroo, but—a quiet certainty of the presence of God. No doubts followed it, though they would surely seem warranted. Joseph's dream was like the face of mother to an infant. It was like the voice of a close friend. Joseph was a good man. He already had a storehouse of trust in God's love. He did not experience this storehouse as broken into and entered, shattered or pulled to pieces by the dream. Instead the message fit right into the design of Joseph's life with God and his love of Mary. And so they followed. What is your internal sense of the Christmas story? Is the birth of God impossible, reserved for children? Or do you find the roots of trust within yourself as Joseph did?

INVITATION TO GROUP SHARING

- 1- "God gave a sign to Ahaz, who hadn't even asked for one. Does God give signs that aren't requested? Give some examples. Do you think you ever miss any of God's signs for you? Why?"
- 2- Can the "grace of apostleship" be different for everyone? Could everyone be "called to be holy"? Name some ways that you can take Christ into your work, home, parish—today.
- 3- List the obstacles God encountered in bringing Jesus into the world. Is anything in this world obstacle-free? How can good come out of obstructions? When Joseph awoke, did Joseph wake up in more than one way?

INVITATION TO ACT

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. These should be your primary considerations

CLOSING INVITATION TO PRAY

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for new insights, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.