

MESSAGE: “An Open Heart”

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Liturgist Text: Isaiah 64:1-9

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to enter an Advent journey through the heart of Joseph who embraced God’s message, Mary and Jesus.

About five years ago, my youngest son, living at home at the time, began to date a co-worker. From the start, it was obvious he was falling in love, so we were eager to meet this young lady. About this, however, Gabe was evasive. Eventually, my wife learned why: his girlfriend was a mother with two young boys, age 2 and 5. Gabe was afraid we might not approve. We were concerned about a 20-year-old entering a relationship with such responsibilities, but Gabe was a responsible person, so we asked him to invite them to dinner so we could meet them. As Gabe and Jess grew in their relationship, Jude and I tried to give definition to our own relationship with the boys. They already had grandparents, so we became Nona and Poo-pah, and they became part of our family.

In our culture, families have lots of different configurations. Sometimes there are two parents with kids; sometimes there are single-parent families. Some kids live with grandma or grandpa; others are part of a foster family. Some kids go back and forth between parents’ homes. The one essential ingredient for success, I believe, is an open heart. Will the bonds of family affection expand to welcome someone new?

That was the question Joseph found himself struggling with in the text we read from the Gospel of Matthew. He had already opened his heart to take Mary as his wife, but that was before he knew that she was pregnant with someone-else’s child. According to Torah, sexual intercourse by a betrothed virgin with another man betrayed the commitment to future marriage and therefore constituted adultery. The law, if enacted, permitted execution after public trial. Joseph was righteous in following the law, but he could not bear to see Mary hurt. He chose instead to be merciful by divorcing her quietly, probably in the presence of two witnesses. With that difficult decision made, Joseph decided to sleep on it. Yet, the matter was far from settled.

In a dream, he encounters an angel of God who urges him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Extraordinary. (pause) What an unusual dream! When Joseph awakes, he is faced with a decision: will he accept the socially unconventional and shameful stigma by embracing the child as his own or will he divorce Mary quietly and move on with his life? It is a question of the heart. Will he open his heart to God’s message, strange as it sounds? Will he open his heart to Mary and accept responsibility in the face of social ridicule? Will he open his heart to Jesus, an innocent child who will otherwise be born out-of-wedlock?

What would you do in his place? It's not completely a hypothetical question, because on any given day of the week, we may find ourselves face-to-face with a human need. And we will make a decision about whether or not to open our heart. It may not be welcoming a new family member, but it may be feeding a hungry belly, providing a coat for one who has none, or bringing chicken soup to a neighbor.

I am reminded of a story I heard years ago about an elderly shoemaker who is told to make ready on Christmas for Jesus to visit. As Christmas arrives, and with it, a snowstorm, he invites a wind-battered postman in for a cup of hot chocolate. He invites a street person in to sit by the fire and drink some soup. He rescues a dog which shivers and seems to have no place to go. He offers mittens and boots to a youth who is out in the storm without adequate clothing. He helps many throughout the day, but is disappointed when dusk comes and Jesus has not arrived. As he begins to pray, Jesus appears before him saying, "Didn't you recognize me in the postman, the street person, the shivering dog, the youth and all the others who shared your gifts of hospitality? Well done, my faithful friend; enter your reward."

What does Joseph do? He takes the risk, does as the angel of the Lord instructed, and takes Mary as his wife, having no sexual relations with her until after the birth of Jesus. This choice, this decision, forever changes the course of Joseph's life. He takes on the role of 'Abba,' 'Daddy,' protecting, raising and mentoring Jesus. Much of what Jesus will be can credibly be traced to the profound influence this man will have on his life. With a single decision of the heart, Joseph begins an advent journey that will lead him to a Bethlehem stable, a flight to Egypt, a carpenter's trade in Nazareth, a family of God.

As Advent begins this new liturgical year, I invite you to join me in an exploration of Joseph's life extrapolated from scripture and a book by Adam Hamilton called, *Faithful: Christmas through the Eyes of Joseph*. As we reflect on what is known and what might be inferred from tradition and the biblical text, we will approach the Christmas miracle through Joseph's eyes, perspective, influence and, most of all, heart.

There is great risk in opening one's heart to another. But isn't that exactly what God did for us by sending Jesus to earth in the first place? The God who opened the heart of heaven to us, now asks us to open the hurting hearts of earth to a gift of amazing grace. Incidentally, you may find it interesting as I did to note that Hamilton's book carries this inscription as a dedication: "Dedicated to all of the children who are refugees and orphans in our world today. 100 percent of the royalties from this book will go to projects benefiting these children." Let's walk to Bethlehem with Joseph and see what may be found.

