

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Advent

December 21-22, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-24

Preacher: Cathy Kamp

What if the story of Mary and Joseph had turned out differently than the Scripture stories we hear in Advent? We have reflected on the Annunciation of Mary on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception when Mary was told: Do not be afraid. This Sunday, we reflect on Joseph being told in a dream: Do not be afraid.

What if they were afraid? What if they were too afraid to say yes to the will of God for them? What if...?

Think about it. Mary was a young, prayerful, faithful Jewish girl. She was betrothed to Joseph and had never been with a man. She is told that she is with child by the power of the Holy Spirit. She is pregnant with a child to be called “Son of the Most High.” It is after the angel tells Mary that the child will rule the world and will be the Son of God that she asks, “How can this be since I have no relations with a man?” We can see where her adolescent mind is going—she is not yet pondering how she could be carrying the Son of God, our Savior. She is worrying about how she will explain the pregnancy, most likely to her parents, and to her betrothed, Joseph. No wonder she is worried, perhaps even panicking. Unwed mothers were subject to death by stoning. What if she had been too overwhelmed and frightened to say, “May it be done to me according to your Word”?

What if Joseph thought it preposterous that Mary had conceived through the Holy Spirit? Up until the dream his plan was to divorce her. Clearly being a kind and caring man, he planned to divorce her quietly, perhaps in the hope of not exposing her pregnancy. A divorce was necessary for them to separate even though they were not yet married. The betrothal was a legally binding arrangement. For Mary to become pregnant without being married to Joseph had serious legal and social consequences.

Yet, both Mary and Joseph, chosen by God, accepted the difficult path of coming together as husband and wife to prepare for the birth of Jesus, the child sent to save us all. As Paul explains about himself in the second reading, he received the “grace of apostleship.” So did Mary and Joseph and they were receptive to this grace. They chose “obedience to faith, for the sake of his name.” Their obedience led to the saving obedience of Jesus at the Cross.

What if we were to accept the grace of apostleship, to live our lives as baptized people who truly belong to Jesus, the child Mary and Joseph brought into the world? As we continue through these final days of Advent, it is not too late to ponder all that God calls us to be. Like the three blessed figures of the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary and Joseph—our Creator brought each of us into the world with a purpose in mind. Each of us has been graced with talents and gifts that are meant to be used in the service of the Lord, to carry on the mission of Jesus in our troubled world. Have you accepted God’s purpose for you? Do you have clarity about what your purpose is? Now is a wonderful time to pray over that question. About 15 years ago, I found myself pondering the question of my purpose. It was a nagging question, and I considered several paths. I was afraid to consider the idea that God was calling me to ministry because it felt so preposterous. What if I did not have the right education? What if my faith was not strong enough? What could God possibly think I had to offer? I most certainly was not worthy.

With the help of others much wiser than myself, I began to understand that no one is ever worthy of doing God’s work. However, what I did have, like all baptized people, was the grace of apostleship. I had the opportunity to accept or reject God’s invitation. Today, I ask: What if I had said anything other than yes to that invitation? At this time of year, I am keenly aware of how truly blessed I am to be a lay minister in the Catholic Church.

As you ponder your purpose, hear the blessing of St. Paul: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.