

Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Advent Dec 23 2007 Year A
Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7,16-18, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25
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Marcus J Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book THE FIRST CHRISTMAS outline the Gospel of Matthew as a pageant in which act one, scene one of Matthew's Pageant begins: *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place this way.* The main character is Joseph. Mary and Jesus are mentioned but the central focus is the person of Joseph.

Unfortunately, for the most part, we seldom if ever talk about the role of Joseph in the life of Jesus. It's like he's in the background, unimportant, an absentee dad in today's terms. But that is not the reality. In fact he plays an integral part of the life of Jesus.

Our introduction to Joseph is simple: *When the mother of Jesus had been betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*

We tend to gloss over the word *betrothed* as if it were an engagement that could be broken off at any time. This is due to the fact that we live in an age when most commitments are considered "made to be broken." Loyalty to a company, a church, a denomination, a club, etc is no longer taken for granted. Engagement and friendship rings are given and returned without any sense of embarrassment. Divorce parties are as common as wedding parties. While this did happen in the time of Jesus, it was not the rule.

Historically the betrothal is a formal contract. It is still used in some Arab Cultures and in Judaism. It is more than an Engagement. In some cultures it involved the groom's family selecting the bride with little to no input from bride or groom and the negotiation of a bride price or dowry.

Both of these steps are still used in a few cases, but for the most part they have been minimized. There is an exchange of vows and signing of contracts and a celebration. The exchange of vows states: "I *will* take you as my wife" "I *will* take you to be my husband," indicating that the marriage will take place at a later time.

Depending on the culture the betrothal can last from a period of a few hours to a period of several years. In most cultures the betrothed couple are expected to spend a lot of time together, sometime acting like a trial marriage and, an early marriage taking place if there is a pregnancy. During the betrothal period the groom builds the home, becomes gainfully employed and proves he is ready for the responsibility of adulthood and marriage.

A betrothal could be annulled if there was evidence of a prior commitment or marriage, evidence of infidelity, failure to conceive (In Scotland, up till the end of the nineteenth century a couple did not marry if the girl could not become pregnant). Finally, the betrothal could be terminated if there was a failure of either party to meet the financial and property stipulations of the betrothal contract.

So, Mary and Joseph were betrothed, i.e. committed to each other, when it was she discovered she was pregnant. It would appear that their culture did not permit a trial marriage arrangement since Joseph considered terminating the annulment quietly.

Again we get a glimpse of the character of Joseph. We are told: *Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.* The statement does not say Joseph was self-righteous. It states he was a righteous man, meaning he was in a good relationship with God and himself. Here was a man who considered what in the best interest of others. Yes, he considered putting her away quietly but he considered this not for his own benefit but for Mary and the child she was carrying. Again, it would appear that he gave it some serious thought and prayer and did not make a decision on a whim. Matthew reports: *But just as he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.*

Like many other people who had a close relationship with God, Joseph believed in dreams and in God speaking through dreams to individuals. This is something that was lost in the Christian community as a whole for years and only in recent memory has there been a renewed development of dream groups and a new understanding of the importance of remembering and listening to our dreams to hear the word of God.

The Angel told him *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*. Reading through the Bible it is possible to come across the phrase, *Do not be afraid* some seventy times. The message is loud and clear. Trust in God. Trust in a power greater than yourself. *Do not be afraid* to take risks. *Do not be afraid* to go where you have never gone before. *Do not be afraid* to dream the impossible dream. *Do not be afraid* to think the unthinkable as it can happen. *Do not be afraid*.

Is it possible that Joseph thought she might not be able to conceive a child? Is it possible that he, not unlike some women of the bible, thought that the child was from God because they could not conceive for a long time? .

This child was to be special. He was to be named Jesus, which means one who saves. And then we come to the point of the story as told by Matthew: *All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel" which means, God is with us.*" Matthew takes a quotation straight out of Isaiah that had nothing to do with Jesus. Rather, the prophet Isaiah was attempting to bring Good News to a people in captivity and telling Ahaz that by the time the young girl standing beside him had given birth to her child the whole landscape would be changed and everything would be all right. Matthew's readers and listeners understood this reference to Isaiah as they needed to hear that everything would be okay, for they too were suffering some persecution.

Joseph awoke from his sleep and took Mary as his wife and, according to their tradition, had no marital relationship till she bore a son whom he named Jesus.

Normally it was the role of women to name the child. By naming the child, Joseph was claiming paternity and making a commitment to raise the child as his own.

The next thing we know about Joseph is his taking Mary and the child to Egypt. Again, even if this is not, and most scholars agree this did not happen literally, it is a reflection of the character of Joseph to protect his family by relocating at a moment's notice to go to a foreign land, to go to any length, to save his family.

Joseph returned with them, took Jesus to be circumcised and offered the appropriate sacrifice and then brought Jesus to the Temple when he reached the age of twelve.

We know very little about Joseph beyond the fact that he was a handyman; Some say he was a carpenter; others claim he was a stonecutter.

Either way, he was a professional and is, today, considered the patron saint of those who earn their living by working with their hands

Joseph was a pious Jew. This is not a negative statement. Rather it is a statement of his faith in God and his ability to listen to dreams and understand them as messages from God.

Joseph understood the meaning of simplicity in everyday life. It would seem that he did not have more than he needed and that he was willing to take risks not for his own sake but because of his belief in God. One might say that his motto was service above self. Listening to the words of Jesus and his lived experience, it would seem that Joseph gave him a well-rounded education while giving him a lot of freedom to find himself and think for himself.

As we close the season of Advent today, let us spend some time in meditation about Joseph, his simplicity, his trust in God, his willingness to put others first. His was a ministry of presence. He was present in the life of Mary and Jesus and can be for us a good example of the meaning of service as we enter this Christmas season and remember that Jesus said, *I came not to be served but to serve.*