

Fourth Sunday of Advent; December 22, 2019; Matthew 1:18-25

Every week during Advent we get a chance to engage the story of Jesus's birth. And it's nice to move week by week through the story and look at it all from different angles. And perhaps this Sunday's text is particularly important for the last Sunday before Christmas.

Why would that be, you might ask? Today's text zeros in on Joseph. We talk a lot about Mary, but what if Joseph had not acted in faith and with such grace in such a crazy circumstance? The story would have been a lot different.

And I think that's important for us to remember as we're probably all about to spend time this week, no longer in preparation, but in visiting and interacting with our own families. This week's text gives us a chance to see that even the little holy family, and in particular the holy family, they had strange circumstances and real challenges that could have pulled them apart. Instead, they all had an important role in pulling together and working on the same team. And it made a difference. What they did as individuals made a difference for all of them.

They pulled together. They acted with faith and grace towards each other. Each one's own actions made a difference in the bigger story playing out around them. And that is true for us in our own family dramas as well. We all—each one of us—are called to act in faith and with grace towards each other—and sometimes that's hard to do with family.

Take just a moment and think about the one person in your family, or maybe it's more than one, who strains your Christian charity. The one person in your family gathering you find it harder to be really truly kind to.

And then think about the difference you could make in the family dynamic if your interactions with them, or maybe if your side comments to other family members about them were filled with a little heavier dose of grace. It could change the game.

And though we don't really think of it in this way, Joseph was in the same kind of position. What if he had become so angry when he heard that Mary was pregnant that he refused to hear the angel's words? What if, rather than the idea to dismiss her quietly, he had instead wanted to dismiss her publicly and expose her to the wrath of the community?

He would have had a right to. But more often than not, grace is about putting what you have "a right to" in your back pocket, and acting in a kind and giving way

instead. And that's good for us to hear before we jump into the middle of our own family dramas.

So as we hear the familiar story, think about what could have happened if Joseph's heart had not bent toward God. And what could have happened if his heart had not bent towards Mary. Listen for the Word of the Lord from Matthew 1:18-25:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord; **thanks be to God.**

Aaron Klink says, "behind the pretty nativity scene lies both a wonder and a scandal."¹ And it's true. Sometimes I wonder if some director or producer took this story and reset it in 2019 in an urban setting, would the scandal of it make the story harder to hear? The West Side Story of the first Christmas. I bet we'd hear the story differently.

And in the same way, we sometimes get a Hallmark card image of what our own Christmas ought to look like, don't we? Everyone's together, everyone is happy and healthy. Nobody's cranky.

Like a Christmas movie with scenes of reconciliation, love and generosity. But it doesn't always work out that way—everyone putting aside their differences to share love with those they've not been getting along with all year—or perhaps even for many years.

In our own lives, we all want to figure out how to have the perfect holiday with our very imperfect families.

¹ Klink, Aaron. "Pastoral Perspective." Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

So it's nice to remember that the ultimate Christmas family, Mary, Joseph and Jesus so many years ago had their own struggles. Huge struggles. Imagine how fearful Mary must have been—a very young girl, thirteen or fourteen years old, hearing the words of the angel, running to her cousin's through the hill country just to have a friend to confide in.

She must have been wondering how she could possibly explain all this to Joseph. This series of events is impossible to explain. She's probably wondering if she should tell him the truth at all—how could he believe such a story?

And then today, here's Joseph, who loved Mary, discovering her condition. Heartbreaking. And here he is, deciding to break it all off, but wanting to do it quietly for her sake. Sad. Hurt. Feeling betrayed. But still loving her.

And then this: this dream, this angel, and the words, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. O.k., wrap your head around that the next morning, and then try to figure out how you're going to tell your own parents that you're marrying Mary anyway. The human drama that this little family endures as they get ready to have this baby—it's just exactly what Aaron Klink says, It's "a wonder and a scandal."

But isn't it also wonderful to know that even the little Holy family, going through this divine story, that they still have to deal with their own and others' human frailty. What we expect from others, we don't always get. Even at Christmastime. What we expect from ourselves, we don't always get. Even at Christmastime.

But in our own Christmas preparations in our hearts, with all the expectations we have for what this holiday should be, we are called to move in faith and act with grace.

For Mary, and Joseph, and this amazing moment in time in the entire history of the world, they have to deal with their own and others' human frailty. Fear, hurt and anger—even if it was misplaced. The stress of traveling to places unknown to have a baby. It wasn't an easy Christmas with a perfect turkey and thoughtful gifts for Mary and Joseph so many years ago.

But what it did have was a handful of heroes of the faith who put one foot in front of the other on behalf of God and love.

So let's let that be our grandest expectation this season. That we will love all the imperfect people around us. That we will risk scandal to show love. That we will accept the Christ child by accepting those imperfect ones around us—including ourselves—and put one foot in front of the other in this journey of faith just as Mary and Joseph did. And in that way, we'll find true joy in this Christmas holiday. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.