

Year A, 2016
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Advent 4
St. Matthew 1:18-25

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

These seven verses are all St. Matthew tells us about the birth of Jesus and, as it happens, they are more about Joseph than Jesus. The birth is mentioned, of course, but there's no drama around it—no swaddling clothes, no stable, no manger, no singing angels, no adoring shepherds. That's why preachers risk being run out of town if they use anything other than Luke's account on Christmas Eve! But it isn't Christmas Eve and, according to Matthew, this is an important story to tell. There may be no drama around the birth, but there's plenty of drama to be found here. This is a family in turmoil and distress, struggling with betrayal and disappointment and caught on the horns of a dilemma. We often stand in awe of “the holy family” thinking they must have been near perfect. But this is an ordinary human family living an ordinary life on the political, religious and economic margins of society. The ordinary life of human families comes to the fore in this story. If you are among those many ordinary families who have experienced a major disruption of what you thought was a near to perfect family, especially at Christmas time, then this story is for you. This is the family God chose to bring Christ into the world. In spite of the agony we experience and the pain of a difficult decision that must be made, God is truly with us. He stands with us in all the ordinary struggles and joys of life.

Joseph was facing two equally painful choices and he saw no third alternative. He was caught on the horns of a dilemma and no matter where he chose to stand he was going to get gored. Betrothal was a legally binding promise of marriage—much more so than modern engagement. The parents had signed a contract of agreement for their children to marry. It often took a year or more between betrothal and marriage—there were arrangements to be made, after all, a dowry to be paid, housing to be built, and so forth. One of them could be too young. Betrothal was for them as binding as the marriage contract itself. The only difference between them was that the betrothed couple was not allowed to come together in private with each other, let alone anyone else. Yet Mary was pregnant ... and Joseph was not the father.

The law was very clear: both Mary and the father (if he were known)

were to be stoned to death (Deut 22.20f). That was a terrible, brutal choice and Joseph could not bring himself to make it and expose Mary to that possibility. Even if a religious court did not demand the full sentence of stoning, it was a horrible thing for Joseph to risk. On the other hand, divorce laws were fairly loose and could be done fairly quietly (although there had to be at least two witnesses...and we all know how quickly news of scandal spreads in a small village). A “quiet” divorce would bring disgrace on Mary and her family for a lifetime and a single mother without a husband would be condemned to live in desperate poverty. But it seemed a better choice than did the other.

When Joseph finally fell asleep, he had a dream. Some people say that the reason we need to sleep is because we need to dream. I think that’s a good way to think of it, for sometimes a dream becomes a revelation. An angel visited Joseph’s dream. Sounds pretty spectacular, but “angel” simply means “messenger.” One would have thought that for something as important as this, God would have sent a host of angels and a brass band; but Joseph gets a solitary, silent messenger who whispers to him in his dream: “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife ... for this is of the Spirit.” Joseph might have wished for a shout from heaven or an airplane dragging a long banner with a message attached, a deeply spiritual friend, or someone who possessed the wisdom of Solomon ... but all he got was a whisper in a dream. Sometimes that’s all we get—a whisper, a hint, or a nudge. I don’t believe God does a lot of shouting. He’s too mysterious for that. We have to work harder to discover a third alternative.

Joseph learned two things from his dream. First, while the Law is good, doing the right thing—the just thing—is better. The law may satisfy the requirement or give us what we deserve, but justice gives us what we need. And, Matthew says, Joseph was a just man. Second, the alternative to the horns of a dilemma is love. Joseph love Mary. This child, the angel told him, will save us from our sins. A good definition of sin is being turned in upon yourself—to take all the love you have to give and give it only to yourself. Salvation is learning how to share it with others.

What Matthew tells us is that Joseph was a just man. He simply needed to find the just solution and, when he found it, the courage to do it.

What the story doesn't tell us is that Joseph must have found salvation—he must have learned to love Jesus very much because when Jesus taught His special prayer, He told His disciples to turn to God and say, “Father.”
Amen.