

Unbelief of a Different Kind

Matthew 1:18-25, Advent Sunday 4-A

December 18, 2016

There are those times for all of us—when we come to some **major turning points** in our lives—and we really do not know for sure what it is that we should do! Young people graduating from high school find themselves at a major turning point in their lives! If they opt out of college, what career path will they pursue? Will they maybe even seek to enter the Armed Forces of our nation at that time?

Some **sophomores** in college may find themselves at a major turning point in their lives, when the registrar's office informs them that it is now "high time" for them to choose a **subject** in which they will "**major.**"

A man and a woman may come to a **major turning point** in their relationship concerning the whole subject of marriage? Should they marry or remain single and if they choose to marry, how can they know for certain that that other person is really the "right one;" the right one to whom they are now going to make such an enormous commitment with their lives?

Joseph was certainly at a major turning point in his life—when we meet him in our Gospel lesson today! He suddenly found himself confronted with a very difficult situation—not knowing really what it was that he should do! Just try and put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a moment, won't you?

He suddenly found himself on an emotional roller coaster! His fiancé had just returned home from a three-month vacation away from their hometown of Nazareth, when she had traveled up north to Galilee to stay at the home of her cousin Elizabeth. Mary comes home with a story that causes the bottom to drop out of Joseph's life.

When Mary comes to him with the news that she **is now expecting a Baby**, that: (1) He knows for certain **could in no way be his**, and when (2) **She insists** that she had **remained faithful to him the whole time**, and (3) **That the Child she was now carrying was conceived within her by the Holy Spirit of God rather than being overjoyed**, Joseph must have been **disappointed and hurt, confused, bewildered and deeply torn!**

What steps should Joseph have taken in resolving his dilemma? What was the right thing to do? Looking at Joseph and seeing how he responded to this great personal crisis—might offer us some help too in knowing what we should do when we come to a major turning point in our lives!

(1) The first thing we notice about Joseph is that he didn't try to come off as being "self-righteous" by condemning Mary and being only concerned with preserving his own reputation.

(2) The second thing we should notice about Joseph is that even in the **aftermath of his receiving what he thought was such terrible news**, he continued to relate to **Mary with love** and a deep **spirit of compassion.**

Joseph's compassion becomes evident when he firmly resolved not to cause Mary anymore disgrace, embarrassment or shame than he absolutely had to. Joseph committed himself to honoring Mary to the greatest extent possible. He responded out of compassion.

Compassion, indeed, is always a generous gift of love. It's natural, sometimes, to separate ourselves from someone we believe has done something wrong towards us. Our basic human instinct is to condemn and avoid. It's harder to put ourselves in that other person's situation and show that other person some empathy than it is for us to simply become judgmental!

(3) And there is yet a third thing that Joseph did that could be helpful for us to remember—when we find ourselves in a tough situation.

Joseph looked to God for guidance. No, St. Matthew doesn't tell us that he began to consider his dilemma in the light of the Old Testament scriptures! Nor does St. Matthew tell us that he went to the local synagogue in Nazareth and prayed!

However, it is not too far of a stretch to conclude that Joseph must have been a faithful man who was seeking God's guidance, because if he wasn't, his compassion he shows to Mary would never have been his choice.

If Joseph had **not** been a faithful man who was seeking God's guidance, he would never have been receptive to receiving, hearing and believing God's Word that would soon come to him through the voice of an angel in his dream.

Because Joseph was open to God's guidance, he was also willing to comply with the directive that the angel had brought to him, who said to him: *“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for that Child which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call his name ‘Jesus,’ for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21)!*

Brothers and sisters our Gospel lesson last Sunday from the 11th chapter of St Matthew had to do with John the Baptist's impending execution, which caused him to doubt whether Jesus was **TRULY THE PROMISED MESSIAH—THE MESSAGE THAT HE HAD SO CONVINCINGLY PREACHED TO OTHERS, OR NOT.** Instead of his being released from prison, John the Baptist is asked to compare the things Jesus had been doing with what Isaiah said about the coming Messiah. Through Jesus' miracles, the blind could now see, the deaf could now hear and people who had literally died like the daughter of Jairus and the only son of the widow of Nain—had been resuscitated from death back to life!

Today's Gospel takes us a little closer to Christmas, but, like John, Joseph initially is unbelieving too, **BUT JOSEPH'S UNBELIEF WAS ONE OF A DIFFERENT KIND REGARDING HUMAN INFIDELITY AND THE INCARNATION OF GOD'S ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON!** First Joseph didn't believe that Mary was telling him the truth, and secondly that the Child she was carrying could in no way be the **LONG-AWAITED MESSIAH!**

Preposterous claims deserve skeptical responses and no man in Joseph's shoes would have reacted any differently. Of course, Joseph believed Mary's news that she was pregnant, **BUT NOT THAT SHE WAS PREGNANT WITH THE IMMANUEL CHILD PROMISED BY THE PROPHET ISAIAH.**

A legal separation and divorce are bitter experiences, but in Joseph's mind, he had no other choice.

Today, of course in our American culture the possibility of a man marrying a woman who was carrying another man's child would not be all that earthshattering!

Joseph's world, however, was much different than the one we live in today. Jewish men were expected to have a son to secure the inheritance God had promised to the sons of Israel.

Since Joseph was King David's direct descendant, he knew that he had the necessary bloodline to become the father of the Messiah, but most people, including Joseph had not fully embraced that great spiritual truth that the Promised Savior could not be conceived of a human father, even in light of Isaiah 7:14! If Jesus had been born of a human father, there is no way that he could truly be born into our world as the sinless Son of God, and unless Jesus had been born of a human Mother and become a human himself, there is no way he could have become our Substitute in fulfilling the **LAW OF GOD** perfectly on our behalf—in **dying upon the cross—not for his sins—but for ours!**

For most everyone then and for many people still today the possibility of anyone ever being born into this world of a Virgin Mother was totally outside the whole realm of human reason!

Furthermore, that dream Joseph had of the angel's commanding him to take Mary as his wife was not his last one.

- He later received another dream in which the angel told to flee from the wrath of Herod to Egypt from Bethlehem to save the Child's life.
- He received still another dream, some years later, instructing him to return from Egypt to their home of Nazareth in Galilee.
- And then there is still another dream on the way back to Galilee, that they should avoid Judea, where the treacherous son of the now deceased Herod the Great, Herod Antipas reigned, who also was posturing himself to kill Mary's Son.

Matthew's Christmas story begins with Joseph's refusal to believe his wife's report that she is carrying a Child conceived in her by the Holy Spirit, but it ends with Joseph as the hero of faith and the guardian of the Child born to be the Savior of the world.

Brothers and sisters, **we can define life in several ways, but one definition of life that would probably ring true for most of us**—is that our life upon this earth—even as the followers of Jesus Christ—is **one long series of dilemmas**.

When we get through one dilemma, we face another. This also describes the Old Testament. God's people get out of one dilemma, and in a short time they are in another. When God resolved Joseph's dilemma of what to do with an unfaithful wife, he was also resolving the predicament of all humanity. Mary's Child would save God's people from their sin by releasing them from death and Satan's power. All this Mary's Child could do because Jesus, whose name means "God saves us," was also the Immanuel Child as prophesied in our Old Testament lesson today—Isaiah 7:14.

The important point of Matthew's Christmas story is that God came to us as Mary's Child. But if we are looking for a secondary point, it might be that of Joseph's willingness not to make a public spectacle of her.

Mary's Child was willing to become the **PUBLIC SPECTACLE MADE OF ALL HUMAN SIN—SO THAT WE MIGHT RECEIVE GOD'S PARDON AND PEACE**.

Besides, like the Old Testament Patriarch named Joseph, Jesus forgives all of his brothers (and sisters too) with whom he has become one by his incarnation of the Virgin Mary!

While preparing for this message I came across a little cartoon featuring a gentleman and his cat. The man is holding his pet feline over that kitty's litter box! In the next frame, he says to her rather loudly: "Never, never, never...ever think...outside the box!"

What's good for cats, however, may not necessarily be good for human beings!

So often the great innovators of new technologies in our world today are people who do precisely this: They think outside of the box! Occasionally they also enjoy coloring outside of the lines and most definitely find some immense pleasures—in pushing the envelope—too far!

If you can't accept the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, then you will never be able to accept so many other vital doctrines of the Christian faith that are constantly inviting us to think outside of the box.

If in your thinking, you are limited to believing that a human being is born, but will one day die, and that for that human being their death is the end of everything, I wish that you too could be more like Joseph—who considered and reconsidered the news Mary had shared with him. If you want to enjoy the forgiveness of sins and be in possession of God's peace that surpasses all understanding, my brothers and sisters, then you too, like Joseph and countless others must learn by God's grace to think outside the box! Amen