

On the fourth Sunday of Advent in Liturgical Years B & C, we hear the story of the Annunciation – of the angel appearing to Mary, telling her that the Lord is with her and that she is blessed. As unlikely as the news is, the angel tells her that she will have a child, a son, who will be called Jesus, who will be the savior, a Messiah. “What?” is her instant reply. “I’ve never been with a man! This is impossible! How can this be?” After the angel assures her that it is all true, and Mary somehow manages to swallow this unbelievable pronouncement, she says, “OK. May it be with me as you have said.” This moment is often used as the prime example of perfect and obedient discipleship – a moment when Mary says yes, I give my life to you. It is the moment when she doesn’t just make up her mind, she gives over her very body – her whole being – to bear the work of God in the world. It is an amazing story of willingness that for me, as a woman who’s had children, resonates deep in my body. It is a story that teaches me on a visceral level about what it means to truly say yes to God.

But here in year A, instead of hearing about the angel visiting Mary, we get Joseph’s side of the story. And I look forward to this Sunday every three years, because I love Joseph – the unsung hero of faithful discipleship. Joseph is simply a carpenter. That’s pretty much all we know about him, except that he’s descended from the line of David. But he’s many generations removed from the old king David, and he is a plain working man, not a lord or a prince. When we meet him, he is betrothed to a young girl named Mary, but they do not yet live together. In those days, being betrothed was more than what we call engagement, even though the New Revised Standard Version uses the word ‘engaged’ in their translation. When a couple was betrothed, legally it was as if they were already married. If the man should die, the woman betrothed to him would be considered a widow. And if either party were to be unfaithful to the other during a betrothal, it would be considered full blown adultery. Being betrothed was legally binding – it was a serious legal contract.

Now perhaps Joseph heard about Mary’s condition indirectly, but in my imagination I witness the interaction between Mary and Joseph when she has to tell him she’s pregnant. First of all, after having had to accept this profoundly unbelievable news herself, which was certainly no easy thing, I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for her to tell her husband-to-be about it. “Well, you see, I was sitting and reading in my room, and this angel came in, and, um, guess what?” And I really wonder how Joseph would have reacted. What could he have said? I’m sure he had a lot of conflicting feelings, because the story seems to indicate that he did care about Mary. He could have reacted out of anger, and certainly could legally have had her stoned and her family shamed. But he did not want to do that. But yet, he probably still felt trapped. As a law abiding Jew, it would have been wrong for him to marry an unclean woman. But he’d either have to marry her or have her stoned to death, neither of which felt right to him.

I imagine him taking a long, long walk to work this out in his mind – maybe many long, long walks. Between those walks, I imagine him working with a vengeance, taking his conflicted feelings out on nails and wood, and then finally coming up with a solution of sorts. He would release her from her commitment to him very quietly so she could slip away. That way, he’d not marry an unclean woman, yet she could perhaps avoid being harmed. It was the best he could do, considering the difficult circumstances. However, just when he had resolved to do this, he had a dream, and in this dream an angel visited him, too. “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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph had his own unbelievable visitation by an angel. And like Mary, he managed to believe the unbelievable. When he awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife. And when the baby was born, he named him Jesus. In those days it was the father’s task and honor to name a child. And under the law, a child born to a man’s wife was definitely that man’s child in the eyes of the law. So Joseph, when he obeyed the words of that angel, was agreeing to legally take this child as his own. To name him. To be his own father.

I like to think of Joseph in his life being Jesus' dad. I picture him sometimes looking at Jesus as a young boy and wondering who Jesus' father *really* is, and then remembering that he is. I imagine him watching Jesus adopt his own trade of carpentry, take up some of his ways of doing things and assume some of his mannerisms and sayings – becoming his son more and more every day – but like all fathers, also watching him become his own man more and more everyday, too – every single day seeing the both/and of knowing that “that is my son” and also “that son is not really mine, but God’s.”

Joseph is to me the shining example of abiding with the mystery of God. Of going along with God, even if you don't fully understand what God's really up to. Of doing everything you can to be the person you know you are meant to be, even as at the same time you are not sure you're really the right one to do it – or that you're doing it right – or even that you've even got it at all right in the first place. Joseph the carpenter, to me, is a beautiful human being, full of doubts and conflicts, but yet faithful to the core.

Will Joseph have a song, or even a line, in the Christmas pageant at 10:00 today? No he will not. He is a central, yet shinningly humble character in the Christmas story. But in his quiet presence he reminds us of the power of dreams. Joseph dreamed of a wife that he cared for and treated fairly. Joseph dreamed of having a family and of a son who was destined to do great things. Joseph dreamed that God was guiding him through his sometimes confusing life with the assistance of the angels. And Joseph believed in his dreams.

May we all have the faith of Joseph today, and every day.