

Hymn

“Infant Holy, Infant Lowly”

VU 58

Scripture           The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke in the dream: “Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus – ‘God saves’- because he will save his people from their sins.” This would bring the prophet’s embryonic sermon to full term:

Watch for this – a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son;

They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for “God is with us”)

Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God’s angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

*Matthew 1: 18-25 (The Message)*

Prayer           Let us pray – God of stable, stars, and surprises, of light and hope and new life, open our eyes and hearts to your presence in our world, forgive our obsession with property and possessions, forgive our compromises and narrowness of vision. Open us to your grace, that we might hear again the song of the angels, and respond with a song in our hearts, and in our lives. Amen

VU 63

Lesson           In preparing this devotion I looked for a hymn which mentions Joseph, I didn’t find one. Joseph is usually in the shadows of any manger scene. The earthly “father” of Jesus is always a minor figure. Joseph is something of a mystery.

What do we know of Joseph? When we first meet him he is betrothed to Mary, which means they had an engagement which could not be broken except by divorce or death but they had not had a formal wedding. I wonder what Mary told Joseph about her encounter with the angel Gabriel. Joseph could have denied fatherhood publicly, putting Mary to shame and divorcing her. But instead they kept the pregnancy to themselves. In doing so, Joseph put his own reputation as a devout man at risk. Then he experienced his strange dream. The fact Joseph took it seriously indicates his sensitivity to the Spirit.

What else do we know about the character of Joseph? Since he was a carpenter, and probably poorly paid, we know he was poor. But we also know he was proud, so he was poor only in goods. In fact, the experience of the Holy Family leading up to Jesus’ birth raises questions about where true wealth lies. Much later when Jesus would talk of persons who were “the salt of the earth” can there be any doubt that Joseph appeared in his mind.

We learn that Joseph was adventurous. It is hard to imagine what it meant to take a family from Israel to Egypt at that time in history. He undertook a perilous journey under dangerous conditions. Here we note the incredible capacity of the human spirit to

expand to meet the needs of the time. Later, Jesus, in summoning his followers to adventure, knew he had lived with a good example of this in his home.

Joseph appears to have been a strict observer of the law of God while at the same time having sympathy. He was a just man, combining rules and compassion – not a common blend. He also appears to have been a generous man. There were several children in the family, of which Jesus was the eldest. As an indication of Joseph's influence on Jesus, there are many compassionate, generous fathers in Jesus' parables.

Finally there is Joseph's sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit. Dreams are one way God has of getting us to deal with our life work, unfinished business, or business that we must begin. There is much talk in Advent of keeping the Christmas spirit alive all year long. That may be too much to hope for. What we can keep fresh is our alertness to the Spirit's bidding. Following the example of Joseph, we can burnish our receptors – attention and expectation.

*Based on material from "a time to gather" by Robert A Wallace*

**Discussion** Discuss fatherhood from the example of Joseph. Talk about examples of fathers in your life, yourself, your sons, your father, your grandfathers.

**Prayer** Let us pray – At this time, O God, help us to understand fatherhood. As AOTS men may we be good examples for others to follow. Make us givers of gifts at Christmas, O Lord. May we not hesitate to share good things that you give, our possessions, our time, our homes, and our friendship. As you have given, so may we. Amen.