

ADVENT: A TIME OF HOPEFUL EXPECTATION

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2007

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Faith and Doubt, Hope and Fear, Joy and Sorrow – and Dreams

Joseph was in a very difficult position. How could this have happened, that his betrothed should become pregnant before their marriage had properly taken place? What would people think? In those times, the stakes involved considerably more than some social embarrassment and loss of face. By the law codes of that time and place (Deuteronomy 22:20, 21), it was very possible that Mary could have been condemned as an adulteress, taken out to a public place, stripped, and stoned to death by the mob.

In fact, Joseph may well have been under some pressure, as a responsible adult male, to uphold the laws and traditions, to make an example of Mary, so that other young girls would think twice before showing up pregnant.

This was largely up to Joseph and what he decided to do about this unexpected pregnancy. Back then, that was the way things were. Clearly, Joseph cared about this particular, vulnerable young girl enough that he couldn't bear to see her life end in such an "example" to others.

But, what would people think? If he ignored this shame on his own honor, how could he hold his head up in town? He had another option: he could "dismiss her quietly" (Matthew 1:19, *NRSV*). While this was not a death sentence, realistically, it was a sentence to a life of wandering and destitution for Mary. No one would want to marry her, with a child born out of wedlock. She would be "damaged goods" in a society where there was no safety net for such women. She would be – terrifyingly – on her own. The best she could hope for would be a life of servitude in someone else's home.

"What would people think?" – In Buddhist tradition, one of the three temptations the Buddha resisted was social obligation, and what we would now call "public opinion." When we resist the calling of the Holy Spirit in our lives because we think people will be outraged or scandalized by our behavior, we are succumbing to this temptation.

In Eastern Orthodox icons of the Nativity, there is often a small scene depicted in the lower left corner: Joseph, sitting and glumly listening to a man talking to him. Sometimes, the iconographer depicts this man with some sinister-looking attributes, and

sometimes just with the kind of expression one might see on one of the town's gossips. Other times, the artist portrays this character as an imp, or a small devil. He represents this temptation, of social obligation and public opinion, that Joseph was feeling pressured by: "What will people think?"

This Joseph would have known the words of Psalm 80, with its sadness: "You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves" (verse 6) and its calling upon God: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (verse 3). This Psalm mentions an earlier Joseph, who also had dreams sent by God, and who also was merciful, as God had shown him how to be merciful – mercy far beyond what we think we may hope for, as that ancient Joseph's brothers thought and feared (see Genesis 37, 39-50).

The doubts and anxieties of social obligation were behind the ethnic and religious divisions between Jews and Gentiles – the "circumcised and uncircumcised" in Rome – that Paul was addressing in the text of Romans. He urges them to remember the abundance and inclusive generosity of God's love, through Jesus. In the *Revised English Bible*, the text emphasizes how the power of the Holy Spirit transcends all human and national boundaries and rules: "*On the human level he was a descendant of David, but on the level of the spirit – the Holy Spirit – he was proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead: it is about Jesus Christ our Lord*" (1:3, 4).

This is the Good News – "it is about Jesus Christ our Lord." In Jesus, we share in the surprising, generous mercy of God – far beyond what we think we may hope for – in the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit. This is the source of our Advent hope, and our Christmas joy – "It is about Jesus Christ our Lord."

This week's Reflection was prepared by Lisa Bellan-Boyer, Professor of Religious Studies at Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, NJ; and an accredited docent at the Tribute Center, a visitor's center and exhibit gallery operated by the 9/11 Families Association, at the World Trade Center site in New York City.

+ + +

This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Russian Federation – With thanks to God for the schools project which aims to reach 10,000 public school teachers with the Scriptures, and with prayers that God guide translators as they continue to translate the Bible into minority languages; **Kazakhstan** – With thanks to God for a strengthened relationship with churches in the Kyrgyz Republic, for ongoing work on the Kazakh Study Bible, with trial editions of Ruth, Jonah, and 1 Thessalonians already published, and for the publication of four activity books for children, and with prayers for funds to rebuild Bible House and for a more convenient location.

Activity Corner: "Waiting for Jesus with a Heart Filled with LOVE"

Supplies needed: Bible; Bible Concordance; small notebook or writing paper; pen/pencil.

The theme for the fourth week of Advent is LOVE. Look up the word LOVE in a Bible Concordance and then look up several Bible passages that contain the word. How is love expressed in each passage? Consider keeping an Advent Journal to record your thoughts and reflections. At the end of the week, prepare a prayer that incorporates your thoughts. Share your prayer with members of your household during a time of family devotion.

Throughout the Advent season, gather with members of your household and reflect daily on Christ's Advent – his coming on Christmas as a baby in Bethlehem, his coming to you each day through the Holy Scriptures and prayer, and his promise to come again at the close of the age. The Bible readings for Advent remind us to remain alert and faithful as we prepare for and await our Lord's coming. If you are using an Advent Wreath, light all four candles prior to the Scripture reading for the day.

| | |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| Sunday | Isaiah 9:2-7 |
| Monday | John 3:1-21 |
| Tuesday | Luke 2:1-20 |
| Wednesday | 1 John 3:1-24 |
| Thursday | 1 John 4:7-21 |
| Friday | 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 |
| Saturday | Psalm 136 |

Conclude each day's reading with prayer and singing all the verses of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" or one of your favorite Advent carols.