

Jeremiah 33:14-16

14 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, '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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Welcoming the Stranger

There are four fundamental beliefs that most people who believe in a God accept: that God is all-powerful – omnipotent to use the fancy word for it, all-knowing (omniscient), in all places, or omnipresent, AND, most importantly, ALL LOVING – omni-benevolent. Our faith is founded on these assumptions, in God's ability to do anything and everything in all places at all times, and that he does anything and everything according to his goodness; if God were anything less we'd be worried – if he was all-loving but not all-powerful or all-present or all knowing, we would live in despair fearing that there could be a situation in our lives where God was either not present or not understanding or not capable of fixing. Even death has no sting when an eternal, all loving, all powerful, all knowing and all-loving God exists.

But we find ourselves questioning God's perfection, don't we? Sometimes we wonder if God is indeed all knowing, loving, present, and powerful, because we see too many horrible tragedies in this world – like the shootings in San Bernidino or in Paris, or the death of a spouse that seems to have come too soon. And if God is so powerful and smart and present and loving, why does he enter this world in such a clumsy way, through Jesus? He enters this world through a poor young woman who has go on a ten-day road march on the week before she gives birth. Mary's water breaks in a town where this no vacancy in any hotel and not emergency rooms to go to. Some astrologers tip off King Herod that his replacement has been born somewhere close by prompting the megalomaniacal tyrant to send out his commandos to slaughter anyone close in age or birthplace to Jesus and forcing the young couple to emigrate – probably illegally. For an all-powerful, all loving God you have to wonder if he may be lacking somewhat in wisdom; any little slip up might have cost Jesus and this entire young family, their lives!!! And so we might question if God is less than OMNI in some way; that he must lack something to "allow" all these risks that he need not take in order to save the world. Indeed why should God need to send

Jesus at all? Why should he have to take on flesh, very fragile flesh, in order to redeem the world? Couldn't he just wave his wand and make it all happen?

Well, I think Joseph may be part of the key into understanding God's mind and God's heart, because Joseph shows us how God's plan for redemption is truly played out. Mary does as well; last week we saw how Mary agreed to take this journey with God by bearing Jesus in her womb, and there were plenty of risks in taking on that task, just as there are risks for us when we agree to "let it be done" in us according to God's word. Today we'll look at how Joseph went out on a limb for God and particularly how much mercy and hospitality was required of Joseph in order to make Christmas possible.

We should not underestimate how important this character named Joseph is to this entire endeavor that God has planned (so awkwardly). Joseph believes that his betrothed has been fooling around, not a very good start to a marriage...and indeed in ancient Judea, Joseph and Mary were already practically married because it took a legal act to nullify their engagement. The typical response to discovering that your betrothed was pregnant before she had come to live with you was to divorce her and find another bride who exercised better self-control, and your ex would likely be disgraced and shunned and disowned. I dare say that the same thing might happen today if a woman were found to be pregnant by someone other than a woman's husband. Joseph would have been *justified* to do just that, to dismiss his wife-to-be and find a more suitable spouse who would not provoke gossip and scandal. That's what a *righteous* person might do, because you don't want to go through life dealing with someone else's shame.

What should get our attention here is that Joseph, though justified in dismissing his fiancé, instead stands by her, knowing that the child she is bearing is not his, and what persuades him to stick by his wife to be is nothing more than a dream. How many times have you had a vivid dream perhaps involving angels, and just said upon waking, "That was just a dream"? Joseph has a dream, but he doesn't take it lightly. In fact he risks ridicule as he stands by his betrothed. Later he'll have to take his wife and newborn child to Egypt to escape the wrath of a megalomaniacal king named Herod who will slaughter all children under the age of three who grow up in the vicinity of Bethlehem. And Joseph does all of this for a wife who he hardly knows and a child who doesn't belong to him. Do you think he ever felt like throwing in the towel, like saying, "Enough's enough. I think I'll go find another wife, start a family of my own"?

Last week I mentioned how flawed so many characters are in the Bible, how corrupted and sinful many of them were, from Jacob to Moses to King David and down the line. Even Joseph must have had his weaknesses. But what is astounding is that God chooses them anyway. God places great trust in these characters who we feel at any moment could slip up and screw up all of God's planning. But God plans things this way, with all these weak and vulnerable people, not because he's foolish or weak or careless but because he shines through these people. Today's Gospel passage explains that Joseph was a righteous man – he doesn't want Mary to be slandered and publicly shamed, but he doesn't want to go through with the marriage either. That's what our human level of righteousness teaches us; to do no harm, and that's good. But God's righteousness goes a lot further than ours. Joseph was ready to say, "This is not my child, so this is not my problem." But God is teaching that it *is* his problem. Joseph might have been tempted to think that Mary, or the angel, were lying to him about this Holy Spirit stuff, but God was teaching Joseph to withhold judgment, to exercise mercy, and to show Mary, and Jesus, the ultimate hospitality, by taking on the role of husband and father, to put his righteousness aside and to be clothed with the righteousness of God, the righteousness that welcomes the stranger and even takes great risks on their behalf, to extend radical hospitality even when one is not *legally* obligated to do so.

But that's what happens when we agree to take on God's righteousness and leave our self righteousness behind.

We had our charge conference on Thursday – that's that day that we report to our Superintendent the state of the church and the direction we're heading. We had a lot of good to report; but the best reports we could give involved the ways that we as a church have been taking risks and welcoming strangers, because that's what churches should do. We're called to take risks in faith the same way that God takes risks in faith in us. God say "I believe in you, Joseph. I believe in you, Tom. I believe in you, Shannon." I believe that you can shine, that people can see my mercy and my love through you when you embrace the stranger and take risks, placing your trust in me."

So where is God calling you to extend mercy and hospitality? Where is God calling you to take a risk in order to accomplish his will? Is he calling you to go beyond "justice" into the realm of compassion? Perhaps you can think of someone in your life who has taken a risk with you. I can recall one...John Hayes, a retired pastor – best person to work for, because they offer up a lot of grace...should have been fired a few times, but John just read me the riot act and put me back to work. And John spoke to me as a human being, not as an employee.

John showed me great mercy and great hospitality, and through him I could see the God of mercy and hospitality. Let us praise God for the way he has worked in our lives through the mercy and hospitality of others, and let us be willing to take risks and "let it be done" in us, that others may see God's love through our deeds.