

4th Sunday Advent (A) Matt 1:18-24

We hear a lot about family values today, and not just from one political party. Are there any normal families anywhere? Are there any families without crises or confusion? Psychologist Virginia Satir, a pioneer in our understanding of how family systems work, claimed that about 95% of all families are to some extent dysfunctional and imperfect. We hear of blended families, alcoholic families, abusive families, extramarital affairs, and issues of co-dependency in families. I encounter such issues often in my ministry of preparing couples for marriage and in my special ministry with divorced men and women. Does anyone come from a normal family? Did Jesus come from a normal family? Did he get off to a good start in life?

Was Joseph an absent father, or was he just silent? There are no recorded words from Joseph in Scripture. His presence is reported only five times: 1- The acceptance of Mary and the unborn child; 2- At the baby's birth; 3- At Jesus' presentation in the temple; 4- At the flight into Egypt; 5- At the finding in the temple.

I think Joseph must have been really confused to find Mary pregnant. In his mind, he wasn't the father. "Was she raped? But she's so happy. Did she have a lover? That's not like her; she is so faithful. And we're betrothed, engaged!" Joseph was between a rock and a hard place, for he loved Mary and he was just and honorable. Joseph had two options: 1- Put her to shame and allow her to be stoned to death as the law required. But Joseph was no legalist, and the law of love was a higher law. Besides, Joseph was no male chauvinist, and that law was definitely patriarchal and based on a double standard for men and women. 2- He would divorce Mary and allow her to live in quiet disgrace. This was the lesser of two evils.

A dream solved the problem. God sometimes works through dreams (flight into Egypt). Sometimes God breaks through our hopelessness and confusion in surprising ways. Saint Thomas Aquinas called the Holy Spirit the God of surprises. The angel said, "Do not fear." Fear is the big stopper in life. Jesus' most frequent admonition in the Gospels before his resurrection is "Do not fear." We take no risks because we do not trust. We need to hear this admonition of Jesus, just as Joseph needed to hear this from the angel. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that the child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." "He is of your family, Joseph, the family of David."

If we let Jesus into our lives, he will save us from our sins as people of faith. We can be saved and healed from some of the woundedness we may have found in our own less than perfect dysfunctional families. And there will be hope if we let Jesus into our lives, touch our hearts, remove our fears, heal our troubled wounded souls and bodies. In him we find freedom from whatever may pull us down into hopelessness and darkness. And so we give thanks that God gave Jesus his parents, Joseph and Mary, and that he is indeed Emmanuel, God with us with us especially in the Eucharist as we gather at his table.

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