

Any of us can be Mary

God with us, borne by Mary's flesh beyond all convention: give us the faith of Joseph to see the Spirit's work where the world sees only shame; to listen to the promise and waken to the cry of life renewed and love reborn; through Jesus Christ, the one who is to come. Amen.

A Collect for Advent 4A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church, page 2

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-2, 4-6, 17-18, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25 (Advent 4A)

December 18, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 1:18-25

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Sometimes I speculate about how many women, over how long a time heard the angel say, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you," before one of them finally said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

The reality is, any of us could have been – and still can be Mary and Joseph. All of us have our angels drawing us into being who we truly are, who are inviting us to act according to our actual identities.

The church and Christian tradition do a disservice to Mary and Joseph and all of us – everyone – by putting on pedestals

the young Jewish girl and her likely-minimally-educated betrothed.

The point of the story is precisely that there was no particular qualifying attribute in either Mary or Joseph. They were not playing the pivotal roles they played because they were people of distinction. They had no standing in their culture, no role or reputation or possessions, access or privilege that allowed them to be who they were or to do what they did.

As Fr. Richard Rohr says it: "The Holy Spirit is never concocted by our actions or behavior. The Spirit is naturally

indwelling from the moment of our conception (Jeremiah 1:5); it is our inner being with God.”

He continues: “The True Self—where you and God are one—does not choose to love as much as it is love itself already (see Colossians 3:3-4).”

Fr. Richard adds: “From this more spacious and grounded place, one naturally connects, empathizes, forgives, and loves everything. We were made in love, for love, and unto love. This deep inner ‘yes,’ that is God in me, is already loving God through me.” (Going forth and returning....)

And that is the “yes” of Mary, the “yes” of Joseph that can be, and in some ways, always is the yes that is our own – whether or not we awaken to the life of that “yes” being spoken in our own inner lives, in our humanity, in our inherent wholeness – as well as in our expressive action.

We are never too old, too busy, too young, too fearful, too ignorant, too disbelieving, too confused, too weak, too marginalized, too sad, too disillusioned, in too much pain or too much or too little of anything else to act as the Mary and Joseph we each inherently are in being *who* we are beyond the appearances and pretenses and assumptions we have about ourselves.

Our angels lure us outside the lines of reasonableness, beyond the margins of what is defensible or logical. We get out of the confining, confounding box by being curious and courageous, hopeful and willing, acting in faith, saying “yes” whenever possible.

The poverty of Mary and of Joseph not only did not disqualify them, it enabled them to have their hands, their hearts, their minds, their whole lives open to receiving what God was offering – which

was, of course, God’s own self – in much the same way we practice by opening our hands and mouths and bodies to the sacrament at the altar week by week, year by year our whole lives long – from childhood to old age (all the same in God).

Mary and Joseph were not following the prescription of a theology book, or obeying some doctrine, ascribing to a dogma; they were living.

Fr. Richard often says: “We do not think ourselves into a new way of living. We live ourselves into new ways of thinking.”

We can hear again and again the story of the nativity, think about Mary and Joseph, who they were, what they did, but in what ways are you Mary and Joseph, what is it you are to birth or serve in this world, in this neighborhood, among the people you know? What is our new creation as a parish? What is God bringing into the world through us, through our openness, through our flesh and form, our “yes?”

Who are we to welcome, to feed, to house, to protect, to encourage, to strengthen, to journey alongside, to suffer with or rejoice with as Mary and Joseph did?

The Christmas story is not something that was long ago and far away, something to passively listen to or sing about, or contemplate in pageants or pretty pictures...

God continues to tell this story, right now, day by day, anywhere and everywhere – and any of us can be Mary and Joseph...

... and Jesus.