

December 23, 2007

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Christmas Music Sunday

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

“God Is With Us!”

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All of us are familiar with laws that order human behavior. If we live with or around other human beings, then there are laws all around us. It is society’s attempt at having one big group agreement as to how we can live together harmoniously. Traffic laws are pretty important. When a light is red, stop and let other people use the street. When the light is green, other people will stop and let you use the street. You can only imagine the confusion and fender benders we would have without traffic laws.

But then there was my grandfather. My grandfather lived long enough to worry my parents, to the ripe old age of 89. I have to think that gave him some sense of satisfaction. In his last years, he liked to drive an enormous trailer with a mind and a direction of its own from his home in a snowy part of the northwest down to the Arizona desert for the winter. Well, now, on the surface that doesn’t sound like a bad idea. He wouldn’t have to worry about contending with snow, and his aching joints could be soothed by the warmth of the southwest. Yet every time he announced that he and my step-grandmother were departing for the desert, my parents and my uncles would go into a frenzy of panic. The telephone wires would buzz between them.

“He’s going to kill himself and Mother Mabel,” they’d say. “His eyes are shot, his reaction time is slow, and he shouldn’t be driving, especially not with that trailer! Worse yet, he’ll hit someone else with his driving!” So my father, or my brother, or one of my uncles would arrange things so that one of them could drive my grandfather and his slowly swaying trailer down to the desert in the fall, and then up from the desert in the spring.

Now my grandfather was an independent sort, and he had quite a stubborn streak. I think he got it from his father, who was the only Union soldier among a family of Confederates in the Civil War. He didn’t like to be told what to do, and that included traffic laws. He was sure the traffic laws were for everybody else, for all the people that didn’t know what they were doing. He, however, knew what he was doing, therefore, he did not need to worry about minding the letter of the law.

I remember one spring, when my father returned home from one of these fabled drives from the desert. He was exhausted. He was pale. He’d been through quite the ordeal. Mom asked, “Well, how did it go?” Dad took a deep breath, and said, “Well, here’s an example of how things went. Dad was driving. It was a day that he insisted on driving. He wouldn’t let me drive that day. We came to a stop sign, and he didn’t look left, he didn’t look right. He just stopped, and then started up again, with that long trailer, right across the intersection. When I tried to say something about it, he said, ‘I obeyed the law! There was a stop sign, and I stopped! That’s all I have to do!’”

Well, on one level, it's true. He did technically and literally obey the law. He stopped at a stop sign. But on another level, he didn't do anything that the law required. He did not stop in a way that allowed others with the right of way to pass safely. There are ways of obeying laws, and then there are ways of obeying laws.

We are told very little about Joseph in the record of the Gospels. The little we do know is that he is described as "a righteous man" in today's Gospel lesson. He does not utter a single word throughout the Bible. He is quiet. He is there. And he is righteous. He would have liked laws.

"A righteous man." A number of scholars think that indicates that Joseph could have been a Pharisee. If nothing else, it is clear that he takes laws seriously. He is serious about obedience to the ways and laws of God. If he was not an actual Pharisee, the witness of the Scriptures, though scant, indicate that Joseph no doubt took Pharisaical teachings very seriously.

"A righteous man." We hear in Luke's Gospel that Joseph is a carpenter. That seems fitting for a righteous man! A carpenter is organized, likes tools in a certain order, and knows a process for constructing all kinds of things. A carpenter frowns upon things that are randomly slapped together, and measures all things with attention. "Measure it twice, cut it once," is one credo of modern carpenters. All lines need to be plumb, they need to be straight and exact. That sounds like a job for a righteous man, one who likes design and order and obedience to laws.

But this righteous man finds himself in a terrible dilemma. He is in a chaotic mess that is not of his doing! His fiancée, Mary, is pregnant, and he is very aware that he is not the father of the expected child. He had thought of Mary as a wonderful wife to be, fit exactly for him. She was a righteous woman, one who also took very seriously the obedience of God's laws and commandments. Together they would be a wonderful team.

But Joseph is stunned beyond words. Perhaps that is why we do not hear him say anything in the Gospels. His well-ordered world has blown to pieces. How is he to respond to this unexpected situation? He never expected to be in this kind of a mess, for he is righteous. He never expected Mary to create this kind of a mess, for she is righteous.

If Joseph adheres to the law that he loves, if he stands by all of the order that surrounds him in that day and culture, he will admit that he is not the father of Mary's child. That is only honest and true, the stand of a righteous man. That will automatically bring a charge of adultery upon Mary, however, and adultery carries with it the penalty of death. His righteous rage wells up from moment to moment. Mary has hurt him to the core, after all. She has shattered his world of order, of discipline, and of righteousness. It is hard to set aside one's pride and assume blame and shame that is not appropriate or earned. The law requires that persons who break the socially recognized bounds of marriage should be put to death. It is the only way to maintain an ordered society.

Without those constraints, human relationships would be crazy. Joseph has been a supporter of the law, as harsh as it may be at times. It is a gift given for the well-being of God's people.

But then he thinks of Mary, and he is concerned for her. He was about to take her as his wife, after all! How could he let her be scorned and ridiculed before the entire town and surrounding population? How could he live with himself, knowing that someone such as Mary had been killed by stoning? She was righteous, at least she had been. She didn't deserve such an end, even if it appeared that she had broken the beloved law.

How would Joseph remain faithful to the letter and to the spirit of the law? It speaks well of Joseph that he would wrestle with such questions, and not jump to a black and white, either-or type of answer to his dilemma. He may need to take a leap of faith that goes way beyond his comfort zone! "Dear God, what would you have of me?" he may have prayed. "How am I to be a faithful witness to your wonderful and ordered ways, while also being faithful to the cry of my heart for Mary's well being?"

Perhaps a quiet divorce would work. Then he could dismiss Mary without the accusation and the death penalty of adultery. Then the real father of Mary's baby could step forward and take her as his wife. Joseph could begin again, picking up the pieces of his life and moving forward, and Mary could live and be the wonderful mother that Joseph knew she could be, even if she was a mother to someone else's children.

A righteous person. In Joseph's struggle, we perhaps see ourselves at times. Life is not always ordered. Life is not always clean and predictable. It can get messy. It can throw the unexpected at you. It can be exhausting and overwhelming. I don't need to tell you about that. You have lives. You know what struggle is like, in the workplace, in the family, in marriage and committed relationships, and in our society both near and far. We live in a world where our nations are led into wars that seem to defy common sense. Life doesn't always come together as we wish it to be.

Joseph is a wonderful example of true righteousness. He seeks to go beyond the letter of the law, and to do what is right. He does not let his affronted rage guide him. He does not let his emotional fatigue get the better of him and settle for whatever easiest answer comes along. He does not hide behind the outer appearance of the law while avoiding a response that has had a dialogue with God. He struggles. He seeks God's guidance.

You see, a new age is dawning because of the baby that Mary bears. This baby is to be named Jesus, one who will save us from all of our error. This baby fulfills the prophecy of one who will be called, "Emmanuel," "God is with us." And when God is with us, things are transformed. Things are done differently. The law takes on a whole new dimension. It is not just petty or scornful. It does not dismiss human beings on a technicality. Human beings, all types and sizes, are loved by God. This new time ushered in by the baby Jesus seeks to reconcile, to mend, to resurrect, and it gives second chances. It is to bring life as God wishes us to enjoy life. It is not to put us in irrational

straight jackets. It is to guide us into ways of justice for all people, and into ways of peace among all kinds of different people.

In this new world, transformed because God is with us in the baby Jesus who will become our savior, the old laws may not work as well as they used to. After all, what purpose could be served by accusing Mary of something that just wasn't part of her overall righteous nature? Joseph's actions speak louder than his words ever could, as he sets aside his own hurt, his own temptation to adhere to a rigid side of the beloved law, and as he reaches out to embrace Mary as his wife. He will protect her, and her child. He will keep her by his side and away from the gossips of the village, even if it means setting her on a donkey when she is very pregnant and taking her on his business trip to Bethlehem. He will flee his secure life and job and run to Egypt as a political refugee to protect Mary and her baby when King Herod threatens to kill the baby. He will carry them both safely back home to the Galilee when the time is right, doing his important part to bear this child of God's good news to the world. Joseph does these things because he knows that God is with us now, and there is a new fulfillment of the law that is taking root because of this new baby. Joseph brings a new dimension to righteous living. Actions usually do speak much louder than words.

So how is your life being reordered by the presence of Emmanuel, God with us, God in our very midst? The coming of Jesus into this world caused Joseph to rethink and reevaluate his most precious ways. Imagine what would happen if the political spheres of our world were reordered such that all laws were altered to fit God's presence here on earth, really and truly. Imagine what would happen in Darfur, in Gaza, in Baghdad, in the forgotten steppes of Afghanistan, in Washington, DC, if God's ways were taken seriously, and if God's ways put living flesh on the bones of our human laws.

So now imagine what will happen in Bellingham, in your very home, if it is understood that God is with us now, and that life is to be reorganized around a living law, around a righteousness that celebrates life lived fully as God the Good Creator intends. Just like my funny grandfather, stopping for a stop sign but not looking for traffic, our ways are no longer to be performed rote, or "just because." Our ways are to be purposeful, they are to be prayerful. Our ways are to reflect that God is with us, right here, right now, and nothing can be the same again. Thanks be to God! Amen.