

Trusting The Word

Matthew 1:18-25
December 25, 2008

I.

Merry Christmas! Today's the day. It comes whether we're ready or not, and now we can breathe a sigh of relief. But as we unwind from our efforts to make this the best Christmas yet, let us also remember that we could never top the first one.

And therein lies the difference between two ways of understanding Christmas. One is the worldly setting of shopping, and decorating, and parties, and all of the other activities that we plan and put on our schedules.

The other is something we cannot plan or schedule because it's always there. God's love for all humanity was made known through Jesus Christ, and it has endured and prevailed without interruption since that momentous event we celebrate today. We either accept it or ignore it, but we cannot schedule it, or decorate it, or manage it to suit our purposes.

And certainly we can enjoy the excitement of the worldly part of Christmas so long as it does not diminish the priority of the spiritual part. The difficulty can be in recognizing the subtle ways in which the world creeps into our worship.

This reminds me of the fellow who told a friend that he had gotten his wife a beautiful diamond ring for Christmas. The friend said "I thought she wanted one of those sporty four-wheel drive vehicles." "That is what she wanted" the fellow said, and then he added, "But where am I going to find a fake Jeep?"

That can be the question we face in many of life's circumstances. What is real and what is not? It can be challenging to continue in the eternal truth of God's love if we are caught up in the urgency of temporal things.

And that was the conflict in which Joseph found himself in today's Gospel. The customs of Jewish society dictated that he should end his engagement to Mary. But God told him to stay with her.

II.

To set the stage, let's go back about six months before Jesus' birth. The angel Gabriel told Mary she was going to give birth to our Lord and Savior. He explained that even though she was a virgin, she miraculously would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:26-38). This, of course, was not difficult for God to accomplish. If he could create the universe in an instant, he certainly could cause Mary to become pregnant.

And here's where it gets interesting. Mary already was engaged to Joseph, but she didn't tell him what the angel said, or that she was pregnant. Instead she left to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, and stayed with her for about three months before returning home (Lk. 1:56).

At this point we pick up on today's reading. When Mary came home her pregnancy likely was apparent, which would have been an unpleasant surprise for Joseph. He probably wondered what he should do.

And we need to understand two things about Jewish culture at the time. First, people engaged to be married did not hang around with each other as is the case today. Marriages often were arranged through families, and strict formalities were observed. Mary and Joseph would not have socialized before their marriage, and they probably did not even speak.

The other different aspect of Jewish culture was that in many ways the obligations of an engagement were the same as those of marriage. There was no distinction between adultery while engaged, and adultery during marriage. And ending an engagement was as serious as ending a marriage.

So, Joseph was in a bind, wasn't he? He thought Mary had been unfaithful and that everyone in the village knew it. The only thing he could do, it seemed, was to quietly break off the engagement so they could go their own ways. All of his dreams of a life together with the woman he loved, and his hopes for a family, were on the verge of going down the drain.

III.

But what happened next? Joseph dreamed about an angel who said it was OK to take Mary as his wife because she still was a virgin and the baby miraculously had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. The angel also said that Mary's baby would save the world from sin for all time.

Wow! What a dream! Would a modern day Joseph believe this? Consider a young couple today planning to get married. What if the woman turned up pregnant, and the man knew he was not the father? And what if he went to bed and had a dream like Gabriel's? How many young men today would wake up the next morning totally convinced that his fiancé had done no wrong and that everything was all right?

Yet, that is exactly what Joseph believed. He eventually took Mary as his wife, let everyone in the community think he was the baby's father, and helped raise Jesus as a child. Joseph's dream convinced him to step out in faith under difficult social and cultural circumstances.

And that's why Joseph's dream was more than a dream. He was touched by the Word of God, and he experienced an overpowering and compelling force. And remember, this was not a situation where God's Word could fit into the context of familiar things. The idea of conceiving a child by the Holy Spirit was an entirely new concept. But Joseph listened to the Lord.

IV.

I imagine that many of us have been in situations where we sensed that God might have spoken to us. And if those instances do not come to mind, don't be so sure that they haven't happened anyway. Don't worry if angels have not visited you in your dreams. God is there when we call him, and he also can be there on his own. All we have to do is listen.

One of my favorite Bible stories is about the calling of Samuel to be a prophet. On two occasions the Lord spoke to young Samuel but he didn't understand what was happening. Samuel went to Eli, an old priest who was supervising his training, and Eli told Samuel what to do (1 Sa. 3:10).

So the third time the Lord called, Samuel said "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" How often do we do just the opposite? How often do we say "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking"? How often do we pray in the sending mode rather than the receiving mode?

Now, there is nothing wrong with speaking to God, for he calls us to do so. But he also calls us to listen, and part of developing a relationship with him is sensing when to do which. Today's reading about Joseph's faith and courage illustrates the importance of hearing and not letting our own hopes and fears drown out God's voice as the Holy Spirit reveals it to us.

So, as we remember Christ's birth on this day, and as we thank God for the gift of salvation, let us also remember to listen and be ready to hear his voice. *Amen.*