

Advent 4A

December 22, 2019

Rev Ken Wratten at St Luke's

Romans 1:1-7

Through Jesus we receive grace and apostleship

Matthew 1:18-25

An angel appeared to Joseph, assuring him that Mary's unborn child was from God, and would be Emmanuel "God is with us".

[Matthew's birth narrative focuses on Joseph. Luke focuses on Mary.]

In Jewish culture there were three steps to a Jewish marriage.

**First:** the two families arranged the marriage. A marriage contract was drawn up, and a dowry was established for the bride, to be paid by the groom's family. My being father of two daughters, paying for their weddings, I wonder when the rules changed...

**Second:** a public announcement was made, and the couple was 'pledged', or engaged. During the engagement, they still lived with their parents, but were referred to as 'husband and wife'. Any infringement of the marital obligations during engagement, such as adultery, could be punished by divorce or even by being stoned to death.

**Finally:** the couple was married and began living together.

The visit of the angel to Joseph happened during the time between Mary and Joseph's engagement and marriage.

God did NOT give Joseph an easy response to Mary's pregnancy. Going ahead with their wedding would place both of them under ridicule by their families and community. Ending the engagement could be a risk to Mary's life. But Joseph believed Mary's story (that God brought about her pregnancy); he believed in the angel's visit to him (not just a dream); and he deliberately decided to make the same decision Mary had made - to do whatever was God's will; to be part of God's plan, no matter how hard that would be.

He protected Mary during their trip to Bethlehem (through Samaria, 70 miles on a donkey) and at their arrival (Posada-'no room').

He received guidance from angels at other times, too: When Jesus was older, to escape to Egypt (to escape the execution of the Holy Innocents by Herod); he was guided when it was safe to go back to Nazareth (but not to

Jerusalem). He took Jesus to the Jerusalem Temple each year at Passover, making sure Jesus got good spiritual training; he taught Jesus the trade of carpentry. Joseph was a faithful Man of God. He showed us how to be faithful people of God.

I remember in my work as product manager: I started being asked by my boss to work on conflict resolution between the company and customers who were upset over mistakes the company made. That was NOT something I wanted to do. But it led to skills to avoid factions, clicks, explosive conflict in a tight knit group.

> Have you ever felt led to do something that made no logical sense, but it ended up being the absolute right thing to do?

> Can you see now where God was at work in the situation that you thought of?

Being faithful Men and Women of God requires that we be sensitive to God calling to us (through dreams, persistent thoughts, the same message from different people we trust, tested against God's Word); being open to God's plan, even taking action that might not make logical sense; and being willing to not just look for the easy way through a situation.

As a faith community, you have committed this facility to house a Christian Preschool, going to a half-time priest, using a Bike Rally and Beer & Wine Stroll as Outreach events; welcoming anybody who comes through our front doors to worship and pray and be part of us. Being strong in faithful service.

And personally; you have experimented being a volunteer in some new ministry setting; tried out leading a personal ministry that was maybe scary at first; recognizing a skill God has given you that you love to do, and how to share it with others. Being strong in faithful service.

Matthew's Gospel gives us the story of only 12 years in the life of Joseph; but what we have from his story is a powerful model for being faithful Men and Women of God. What a powerful part this is, of our Christmas story... Amen.