

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 22, 2019  
Church of the Holy Cross  
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

### **What's in a name?**

In today's Gospel we have an overview of what was happening before Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph were set to be married, but it comes to light that Mary is with child. In that time there was an absolute three-step process to getting married: the family agrees to a union, there is a public announcement of the engagement, then the marriage and living together in one home. There is shame in not following this social code to the letter for the man and the woman. Oddly enough, the supernatural conception was not the weird part from a Hellenistic (Greek) world view—think mythology. What was extraordinary in this story was that the marriage happened given the circumstances, and Joseph naming the child as his own—and that took courage and obedience.

I am not sure about your personal experience, but I can tell you that having an unexpected pregnancy in a family is, well, disruptive to say the least. Even today we have not come much further than 2000 as far as the shame factor of an unplanned child goes, so imagine how Mary, her parents, Joseph, and his family would have responded, given that these were the days when a woman could be stoned for such an offense against society. I only hope that one day, regardless of the circumstances, all children are welcomed and seen as a sign of hope for the world that they are. The Gospel does not seem to give a lot of the back story or describe the emotional turmoil Joseph and Mary must have been going through. Sometimes I think we hear these stories, and forget that real people experienced the disappointment, anger, and fear that comes when the plans they made for their lives fall apart in front of them. It happened to them, it happens to us and our friends and families. The Gospel is a guide for us of how to respond—what to do in the space we have between stimulus and response, to act with empathy, compassion, and love. It shows obedient in the face of controversy, and choosing to do the right thing, not just the logical, practical thing to do.

This passage tells me that Joseph was an empathetic and compassionate man. He was willing to dismiss Mary quietly and avoid the public disgrace. “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.” Well Joseph did the right thing. In the space between hearing that Mary was with child and what that would mean for both of them, and in the space after having the dream to stay with Mary and name the child Jesus, Joseph listened to his head and his heart, and chose love.

Now Joseph likely knew the Scripture, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” Even so, I am not sure he was comforted, when faced with the idea a prophecy was coming true in his lifetime, and in fact, in his life. I imagine if any of us actually saw some of the visions and predictions from Revelation pop up in front of us, we would pass out from fear – or perhaps figure it was a movie being filmed. For Joseph however, this dream and vision of his future was all too real, and he had decisions to make that would impact the whole world—he decided to stand in the light. Joseph listened to his head and his heart, and chose love.

Joseph named the baby, claiming Him as his own and naming Him Jesus, being obedient to the command given to him in his dream, and because of this, Jesus is known as a descendent of David. Naming a child is a pretty important decision, and one most parents I know take it seriously, and there is honor and family traditions involved. I understand that my own father used to sit facing a children's chair handed down in

my family, and imagine the little child that was to be born, and he would call out names, trying each out. I am just glad they finally settled on Jamie.

I was talking to our accountant Lori about the Gospel for today, particularly the line, "...and they shall name him Emmanuel." Lori said it always bothered her why we call God's son Jesus, and not Emmanuel. I have no idea where this thought came from but I instantly replied to Lori, "We call him Jesus and not Emmanuel because Manny the Christ just does not have the same ring to it as Jesus. I really hope Jesus also thought it was funny, or I am in trouble. I digress..."

Have you ever decided to do something because it was the right thing to do, even though it might not look that way? It is difficult to always do the right thing, or even to know what the right thing is. There is often pressure to make the smart choice, the logical choice, and forget to refuse evil and choose the good. Too often, I think we forget to listen to our head and our heart, and to choose love, and walk in the light.

You have often heard me say that you should do the best you can, and leave the rest to God. I want to share with you a story of why I say that so often. When I first became a Lay Pastoral Minister, I visited Mrs. Alice Wilder in the nursing home. I was assigned to see her once a month, but I tried to see her almost every week—I so enjoyed her company—she was 92 when we first met. She was recovering from a stroke and throat surgery, and had recently regained her voice. One day I positioned us facing each other, her in a wheelchair, me in an arm chair with a rolling bedside table between us. I had set up the home communion kit, we said prayers, I took communion and leaned forward and gave her communion. Almost immediately, she began to choke, she was not breathing, choking, and I asked, "Are you ok?" She indicated her throat, and I tried to get up to get a nurse, but I was blocked by the table wheels and her chair—she kept choking. I half climbed over the arm of the chair and grabbed the door handle of her room, intending to open the door and yell for help. The handle clicked, she drew a breath, and said, in a shallow tone, "I'm ok." Whew! It took a moment, I got her a sip of water, we said a prayer, and I cleaned up the communion kit. We sat quietly for a long time. Finally, I broke the silence and asked, "Mrs. Wilder, do you suppose it would have been a good thing or a bad thing to have choked to death on the body and blood of Jesus?" "I am not sure she said, but I had the same thought." She added, I was wondering how you were going to explain it to my daughter Mary?" We agreed that these were interesting questions. I said, "Speaking of interesting questions, what is the meaning of life?" She did not hesitate. Mrs. Wilder said, "You do the very best you can, and then leave the rest to God. That is the meaning of my life." Doing our very best is the most any of us can do. Trusting God to take it from there, that's faith.

When you decide to do something because it is the right thing to do, it is most important to remember to be true to yourself. Listen to your head and your heart, do the best you can, and leave the rest to God.

It is still Advent, so stop worrying if you are ready for Christmas. Christmas is a celebration, a twelve-day party, not a deadline—unless you have kids. In the same way, Jesus did not say, come to me, the folks at the top of their game who have it all together, shopping done and gifts wrapped. Jesus said, When you're weary, feeling small, tired and discouraged, come to me and I shall give you rest. If you are really living a life where you are trying your best to follow the commandments, and to love God and your neighbor as Jesus loved you, then the rest is just details—and we know what "they" say about details right? The devil is in the details. Being a Christian is a way of life not a race to a finish line. It is a slow, intentional, walk toward the light of Christ. AMEN.

+++

[https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4614-6086-2\\_185](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4614-6086-2_185)  
<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-biblical-difference-between-visions-and-dreams>  
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/vision?s=t>

<https://www.biblestudy.org/bible-study-by-topic/visions-in-the-bible.html>  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org>