

8 December 2010
Advent 2 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Greenspring Village, Springfield, VA

Jesu Juva

“Joseph: Protecting Father”

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-23

The story of Joseph is presented to us in the Scriptures so matter-of-factly. This happened, then this, and then this. But these things were anything but matter-of-fact. How difficult and challenging these days must have been for Joseph.

First there was the sting of finding out that his betrothed had been unfaithful to him . . . or so he figured. How else to explain that she was with child? We all know how those things work. And so the joy of the preparations for their upcoming marriage feast was replaced with the disappointment of betrayal. But that disappointment is soon replaced with fear and wonder, as an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him what is happening here. Things are not quite the way he thought. God is at work here, and Joseph is part of His plan. And so there is no divorce. He takes Mary as his wife, taking shame upon himself in order to protect her.

Then we learn that Joseph and his family aren't going to have a normal family life. For not-too-long after Mary's son is born, Joseph receives another dream, telling him flee to Egypt, for the king of that region is soon going to come on a mission to destroy the child. So now Joseph must go and live in a strange country, with a strange culture, and a strange language. And for how long? *Until I tell you*, the angel says. An indefinite period of time. And so Joseph takes his family and leaves all that he has known all his life, and journeys to Egypt in order to protect them.

And then finally, we are told, Herod the king dies, and Joseph and his family can go home. So Joseph uproots his family again and starts out for Israel, only to hear that things still aren't too great there under the reign of the evil king's evil son. And so in order to protect his family one more time, they travel past Israel and settle in Nazareth, Galilee.

After this, we don't hear much more about Joseph. We know he takes his family to Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus turns twelve, but nothing else. This man whose quiet life was suddenly turned so upside-down, simply disappears from the scene. An ordinary man used by God in an extraordinary way. A faithful man who trusted in God in a very difficult time.

Maybe you can relate a bit to Joseph. Maybe your life, too, has been turned upside-

down by unexpected events; maybe you, too, have been taken on a journey by God in your life - either a physical journey, or a spiritual journey, or both. Maybe God has used ordinary you in an extraordinary way.

But tonight consider - as we considered with Zechariah last week - how Joseph and his story gives us a picture of what God has done for you.

For it is we who have been unfaithful to our beloved, isn't it? The Scriptures often call sin spiritual adultery, and we are full of it. Sin is conceived in us and often grows in us until we give birth to the words and deeds of evil. And for this, we deserve condemnation and death.

But tonight, God sent His messenger - not an angel, but the prophet Isaiah - to proclaim a different word. **Comfort, comfort, my people,** says God. **Speak tenderly,** not harshly, to them. And tell them that their **iniquity is pardoned.** How can this be? Because after our unfaithfulness, God did not divorce us, but remained faithful to us. He will take our shame upon Himself, and send His Son on journey - not from Israel to Egypt, but from the glory and life of heaven to the sin and death of earth - to do so. Another King Herod will threaten Him, but not kill Him. Jesus will die; but His life will not be taken from Him. He will offer it. For the life of the world.

All this God does to protect us, from our enemy that so seeks our harm and death, and has from the very beginning: satan. And so from the very beginning, God has proclaimed His protection and faithfulness to us; He has heralded the good news that He does not send us away, but will come to be with us. Or as Isaiah said to us tonight:

“Behold your God!”

Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms;

he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

That is the very truth we behold at Christmas. That Jesus is **Immanuel, God with us.** We behold our God, as He **comes** to us **with might** that looks mighty weak - in the manger, in human flesh, on the cross. But in these very weak-looking but mighty ways, bearing our sin and shame, providing us His **reward** and taking our **recompense** - what we deserve, and **tending us as a shepherd.** Our protector from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. That in all the places you go, and all the journeys you take - even that final journey to the grave - He will be with you.

*And for how long? How long will we remain in this Egypt of sin and death? Like Joseph, **until He calls us**. And so, like Joseph, we are faithful in our callings until He does. Until **out of this Egypt He calls His son**, for you are now His son, by virtue of your baptism into Christ. And He will take you home.*

So as we continue in this Advent season, like Joseph, hear this comforting Word of God - that your God has come to be with you. For He is faithful. And when Christmas comes, look to the wood of the manger and the wood of the cross, and wonder . . . at the mighty weakness of God and His love for you. A birth story told so matter-of-factly, but which we know is anything but.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.