

WHAT DO YOU HEAR? Right now, at this very moment, what are you hearing? Now, I’m sure some of you are probably saying me, but, I wonder if you hear anything else. Say, the rustling of paper, or the sound of breathing, either your own breath or that of a neighbor close by.

Hearing is altogether different from listening isn’t it? Listening is a very difficult skill, and because it is a skill it must be learned. It seems we are not naturally inclined to LISTEN. Most of us, even those who might appear more quiet find hearing much easier than listening.

What exactly is the difference, you might be wondering? Well for one, hearing is a sense while listening is a skill. Even more important, the skill of listening requires attention. In a world overloaded with sounds, hearing becomes easy while listening, real listening is hard because of all the potential distractions leaping into your ears every thousandth of a second. And because such sounds come from the external and the internal world, I believe the difficulty of listening is not a new phenomenon. This is especially so when we try to listen to God or God’s Messengers. It seems to me that when Joseph chose to listen he was choosing to take part in all the wonder of a life lived in companionship with God.

Now last week we spent time thinking about the unexpected events of life through Mary’s eyes. Specifically, we wondered how a teenage Mary found peace in what would otherwise be chaos. And while Mary gets a lot of good press, particularly in the Catholic tradition, and deservedly so, for me, Joseph’s story is just as compelling.

I don’t know about you, but for me, it is interesting to ponder how his thought processes must have unfolded over time. While it may have been a marriage arranged by their parents, Joseph loved Mary. He was looking forward to their life together. All that hope came crashing down when he found out she was pregnant. He planned to act with compassion more so than rage. Such an attitude is commendable.

I believe he experienced a whirlwind of emotions, including anger, frustration, and fear. Surely, he feared what would happen to him, to Mary and to their families.

So where did Joseph turn for advice? Did he have a trusted group of friends, elders, advisers? Or was he trying to handle this all by himself?

The best we can figure is that Joseph initially planned to dismiss Mary, but ultimately changed his mind after listening to the advice of an Angel of God. So, what might have begun as a solo act, presumably driven by fear, changed into a combined act of togetherness and relationship allowing Joseph to choose to live his true authentic life without being scared.

Make no mistake, before his experience with the Angel of God, Joseph was scared. Why else would the Angel say, Joseph ... do not be afraid ...” His fear is understandable though because he had just found that he had a problem. Now the severity of this problem should not be understated if we are to have a chance at grasping the enormity of the problem facing him. So, a little background,

During this time, the parents of a young girl would enter into a transaction with the parents of a young man, pledging their daughter to the young man. From all accounts, this is how Mary became engaged to Joseph. Suffice it to say, their path to engagement was much different than ours today. Nonetheless, being pledged to, or engaged to a man was a serious matter. So, serious in fact that the only way to undo it was for the couple to go through a divorce, but to do that, the man must have a valid reason, one of which was adultery. The punishment for any women found guilty of adultery was death by stoning.

Now, for the people directly involved the shame and guilt was significant to say the least, but the community didn't stop with them for the shame and guilt extended to their parents. I don't know about you, but knowing this helps explain why generation after generation after generation of parents have felt the need to tell their children that the choices they make don't only reflect on them, they also reflect on the family. While I believe it is open for debate whether or not ones actions should be viewed as a statement about their parents, it does provide much needed context for the situation facing Joseph.

So how does Joseph respond? According to Matthew's Gospel, Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly because being a righteous man he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. This does appear to reveal for us a bit of Joseph's character and what type of man we are dealing with. It certainly seems that no one would have blamed him if he had exposed Mary and called for the appropriate punishment. But Joseph was too kind to allow such a thing to happen to Mary, to whom he was committed. Still, it remained a serious problem for him.

This could be the end of this story, if it were not for God sending Messengers and Joseph's willingness to listen to God's Messengers no matter in what form they appeared. So, after making the painful and difficult decision to dismiss Mary, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him that he need not be afraid to take Mary as his wife for "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Some might have thought such an event to be a fantasy or a nightmare, but not Joseph, because Joseph did more than simply hear what the Angel said, Joseph listened.

What must it have been like for Joseph to choose a path radically different than the path his culture taught him to take? When I try to walk in Joseph's shoes I am blown away by the courage it took for him to pay attention, to listen to the words of this Angel of God. Joseph chose a path that some might say was against the culture of his day. The culture in which he was raised. The culture he knew because he was a good Jew who knew the stories of his ancestors and the rules of his society. Don't you know the volume of this cultural voice was loud, yet in his dream that voice was drowned out by the Angel of the Lord.

By paying attention to the words of the Angel, Joseph understood the advice as the fulfillment of a promise from God to the Jews. It seems Joseph believed because he listened. Joseph believed because he paid attention, and the courage this must have taken is breathtaking.

Because of his courage to listen, he married the girl and he named their child, Jesus. Not only was he a kind and gentle man, he chose to listen to that voice from God and follow God's call on his life. Joseph's courageous act of listening and responding, his courage to take part in such a counter cultural act, his decision to follow God became a path to Joy. You see, Joy is what we experience, even during suffering, pain, solitude, when we pay close enough attention to know that we are sharing in something redemptive, powerful, holy and right.

This is what Joseph knew because he listened and understood this birth to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. The connection between verse 23 of today's scripture and chapter 7 verse 14 of Isaiah should not go unnoticed, for they are almost identical. Listen to Isaiah's words, (Isa. 7:14) "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." And now listen to verse 23 from today's text, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Still, he had this problem. There was shame and embarrassment enough to go around. We've all been there. Something happens in the family or in our lives and to protect the reputation of the family name, we hush things up as best we can. We hide from the truth.

But during his problem, God offered a promise. After the dream, Joseph had a whole new perspective. You know how it is when you have a problem. In the heat of the moment, you imagine that it will turn out in the worst way imaginable. People tend to overreact in the face of problems. We become so intent in the resolution of the problem that we lose perspective.

This is where the promises of God...especially the promise that God is with us...serve us so well. They give us perspective.

Those who seek counseling often need help becoming calm first. They need a little perspective. We need someone to help us look at things in the light of the total picture, not just the thing that has us torn up. For Joseph, it was the Angel, and Joseph listened. For us, it is the Holy Spirit that lives and abides in us. While everything around us may seem to be coming apart, we need to remember that even then, God is with us.

And it is that presence that gives us strength and gets us through the tough times. I know that in my own life, and I trust some of you have experienced that in your own lives.

Emmanuel...God is with us. That is the promise to which all of us hold in this Advent season. And it makes all the difference in the world. It gives us a perspective that the world simply cannot give.

Just like all of us, Joseph had problems. Just like us, Joseph needed a new perspective. Just like us, Joseph came to learn that God's purposes can be accomplished even through our times of trial and temptation.

He had a problem. God gave him perspective. And he understood the purpose. And that process changed everything for Joseph. He could face the whispers in the street. He could deal with the pointed fingers and knowing looks. Because he knew God would bring something very good and wonderful from his problem. Faith allows us to live like Joseph.

‘And they shall name him Emmanuel...which means God is with us.’

‘And he will save his people from their sins.’

And that, my brothers and sisters, is the Gospel for this Advent Sunday.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.