

St. Joseph--2013

(2 Sam 7:4....16; Rom 4:13....22; Mt 1:16....24)

Here I was yesterday, March 18th, and I was clueless as to what to say in my homily today. I was reluctant to call on St. Joseph because he often treats me as though I were a nitwit--and I am very sensitive. However, as I'm struggling to come up an idea--any idea--he surprises me by suddenly appearing. He says, "what is it this time? I heard you sigh, so thought you must be in need." I said, "How good you are to come, even before I called on you." "What are friends for," he said, but I detected a slight edge of irony. Then he went on, "Never mind, let me guess: tomorrow you have to give the homily and you are clueless as to what to say." "How could you possibly know that?" He rolled his eyes but said nothing. Then he went on, "don't you have at least a starting idea?" I said, "I thought I'd like to talk about the trip to Bethlehem." "We've already done that." "I know, but we certainly couldn't have exhausted ANYTHING contained in the Scriptures."

"Well, all right, but for this I'm going to have to assume the role of "the omniscient narrator," as you say in your "Narratives" class. "Why would that be?" "Because I'm going to be speaking about things Mary was thinking but never verbalized." It was now several months after the Annunciation, he went on, and it was quite apparent that she was pregnant before and we began to live together. Of course I knew because the angel had appeared to me in a dream and revealed the mystery. Mary, however, did not feel free to reveal the things Gabriel had told her, so she

had to bear the embarrassment and the gibes. And believe me there were plenty of them. Mary was so extraordinary in so many ways that there were many who were jealous and they all became detractors. And of course, even if Mary had felt free to reveal the truth, who would have believed her? "I'm going to be the mother of The Holy One of God, the Messiah!" You can imagine how that would be received!

But Mary had other problems. Although Gabriel had not used the term "Messiah," all that he did say led that way: "The Lord God would give him the throne David his father." Mary knew the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, as the prophet Micah had said, "From you [Bethlehem] shall come forth for me the one who is to be ruler in Israel." But how to persuade me to go there? All I had been told was that "it was through the holy Spirit that this child was conceived in her." No thought of going to Bethlehem ever entered my mind. Mary began to pray for help in her dilemma.

So when I was at the marketplace as heard announcement of a census, that every family heard would have to go to his ancestral home to be registered, I was very troubled. I didn't want to leave Mary alone in her condition, nor should she attempt such a trip in her condition. I began to pray for help in this quandary.

When I got home from the marketplace, Mary said, "Joseph! What's wrong? You look like you just lost your last friend!" "That tyrant who pretends he's our benevolent emperor commands that all family heads must go to their

ancestral homes to register for a census." Mary prayed a secret prayer of thanksgiving and said, "Why that's Bethlehem! What's wrong with that?" "I can't leave you alone at a time like this." "Of course not, I'll go with you. I promise you, I'm strong enough, and when I'm tired of walking I can ride on Penuel." (Penuel was our donkey.) And so it was decided--or rather Mary decided--that she would go with me to Bethlehem.

Mary was as good as her word. She walked at my side most of the time; she rode Penuel when she tired. At any rate, we arrived safely in Bethlehem. I left Mary at the outskirts of the town with Penuel while I went to seek out my Uncle Joshua. I hadn't been in touch with him for quite a while, but he had assured me that I had a place to stay any time I came to Bethlehem. What a blow! I learned he had moved far down south to Beersheba. His son Jehoshaphat, my cousin now owned the house and would gladly have given us room, but he already had as many as the house would hold. "Half the people in Israel, it seems, are claiming descent from David," he complained, "they have descended on Bethlehem like a swarm of locusts; Jeconiah, the old skinflint at the inn is charging triple the usual price, and you'd be lucky to get a place there."

We went to the inn, but it was as advertised: crowded and charging triple the usual rate. The innkeeper took one look at us, knew we didn't have the fare and said, "No room." He didn't even say "sorry." I said, "Look, my wife is pregnant; she may be giving birth at any time--you can't turn us away." He said, "I shouldn't do this, but I'm all

heart, so I'll let you stay in the stable. Hasn't been mucked out in a while, but its empty since my mule died." We went around to the back only to encounter a very large, belligerent looking man. He said, "What yer want? I rented this stable for my ox." I said, "you must be a squatter; the proprietor has given it to us. However, we'll let your ox stay if you don't make any trouble." With that his belligerence subsided.

It turned out he was the father family squatting in a small lean-to next to the stable. The man's name was Caleb, His wife was a small timid woman with bruises visible on her arms, named Debra, and there was a 6-year old son, dirty and surly-looking, named Abel.

Mary felt the birth was near, I went to find the midwife, but by the time I got back Mary had already given birth. She was looking lovingly at the infant Jesus, and from afar we heard the beautiful angel voices singing to the shepherds "Glory to God on high, peace on earth." Debra crept in and spoke adoringly of the beauty of the child, while Abel scowled in jealousy.

The next morning our sense of rapture was rudely broken as we heard a loud slap-sound from next door, Debra began weeping hysterically, and Caleb yelled (at Abel, obviously) "come back here, you little brat or I'll beat you worse than I did your mother," but Abel had run out.

Later in the day Mary was resting and I was sitting out of sight, little Abel crept into our stable with a handful of dirt and headed toward Jesus with obvious intent. I was about to intervene when Jesus turned on Abel a smile so

full of love and tenderness that Abel stopped in his tracks; he dropped the dirt and stood transfixed, while a tide of love washed over him. Soon he began to weep, but his face took on a look of pure joy. He ran into the lean-to and through the door I could see him jump into Caleb's lap, put his arms around his neck, and Caleb's angry "Why you little ..." was cut off as the child kissed him. Caleb's look of anger changed to wonderment and then to tenderness toward his little son; he turned his head so that the tears starting from his eyes would not be seen. A little later Debra returned and was astounded at what she saw. They heard Caleb say, "Come here, my dearest, ..."

The next day that little family resumed their journey to wherever they were going and stopped by to say "goodbye." Abel was hanging onto his father's hand and Caleb slipped his arm around Debra's waist; they thanked us for what we had done; actually, we hadn't done anything, but we knew what they meant. Jesus, Mary, and I stayed there for some days while Mary regained strength for the trip to Jerusalem and her Purification. During the journey there Mary reflected, "I've always known the power of love, but I never realized before how contagious it can be. If more people realized it, how different our world could be."