

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year A
[Reading of letters from the Synod Bishop and Vice President]
23.xii.2007, 10:00, Holy Eucharist – ELW 5
Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7,17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania

Jesu Juva!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the
Angel of the LORD commanded him**

--Matthew 1:24

For theological reasons, Saint Joseph is usually depicted as middle-aged, graying and, we are to suppose, having moved on past the passions of youth to the wisdom of age. Would that gray hair or beard were all needed for that! But, whether old or still young by the standards of his day, not ours, and whether moved more by reason and a sense of right and goodness than by passion, Joseph of Bethlehem, descendant of David, was a man in the midst of life, a

carpenter or, literally, ‘one who makes things,’ an artisan of some sort, who was making his living way up north, in Galilee, probably in Sepphoris, the nearby capital of Roman Galilee, a city in which he and his Son, Jesus, would have had to speak Greek in order to get by as artisans. In Galilean Nazareth Joseph was far away from his native Judæa, away from his family, far away from Jerusalem and its Temple, a stranger among strangers, Jews like none he had ever seen as a boy, speaking more Greek than Aramaic, associating freely with Gentiles, none too scrupulous about saying their prayers but strict as iron with their young women.

He would know, for he was betrothed to one of them. Back home in Judæa, Joseph and Mary would have been encouraged to live together after their betrothal until the details of the dowry and the planning of the wedding

had been worked out. But here, in Galilee, the men would sooner stone a girl like his beloved as look at her if she lived with her fiancé, or if there was even a hint of indiscretion. There was more than a hint of indiscretion in Mary's case. Now Joseph, honorable and brokenhearted, was faced with a decision. He carried that dilemma with him into a deep sleep. Sometimes, when faced with decisions one would rather not even consider, that is all one can do.

In the depths of that sleep, a messenger of God, an Angel of the LORD, speaks to Joseph. Was that messenger one of the Archangels, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel or Michael, or just an ordinary member of the Heavenly Host? Joseph heard the Angel in his dream, that is the important thing, and Joseph's dream became one with the dream of God. Joseph awoke, resolved to do what his heart wanted from

the time he was introduced to Mary of Nazareth, to welcome her into his life, to protect her and to provide for her as best he could. Doing those simple things would change and determine the course of the rest of his life. Joseph would have to lead a life of hiding with his bride and her miraculous Baby. They would return from Egypt to Nazareth after the Baby was already a little boy, and there Joseph would try to take up the thread of his life a few years previous. The three we call 'the Holy Family' would have returned to a lot of questions and would have been regarded by precious few there as 'holy' during their earthly lifetimes. For Joseph, it would have been much simpler to have turned his back on Mary and the Child, but neither did God create Joseph for a simple path, nor did the Angel of the LORD call Joseph to an uncomplicated life.

Neither did the Holy Spirit call our Bishop to an uncomplicated life or a simple path. In my opinion only, those who voted to impose the Episcopal office on him should have taken that already manifest fact more earnestly into account, for the devotion of this long-serving pastor of our church and of this synod was marked for nearly three decades by the path of his first wife in her battle with cancer, a battle from which she was released by Christ's victory over death only months before his election as Bishop. In what ways she and he managed to cope and to what extent palliative care was needed and sought not only for the cancer patient but also for the cancer spouse, God alone knows and Almighty God alone need know. But now, in this dreadful new office to which he has been called on our behalf and for our common good, and now, in what the Church prays will be a healing and joyful new

marriage with a partner who understands the burden of the ordained ministry as a pastor, our Bishop has found the strength, the courage and the faith to name his illness, and not to hide it, and to seek treatment for it.

The Church prays with and for our Bishop that, given the time and resources to heal, he will recover his health and vigor and be able to lead as he has been called. But, if the Reverend B. Penrose Hoover does nothing as Bishop more than what he has done, in openly admitting in courage and hope what many hide in fear, and in seeking wholeness where now there is brokenness, he will have led us as true shepherd of Christ and as a Pastor of Pastors.

There will be those within our synod, its pastorate and congregations, for whom the sad tidings I have read in the two letters this morning will be cause for outrage and recrimination. And there will be those of other churches in

our area who will deride us because of our Bishop's confession, repentance and resolve to seek healing. These are they who despise our Lutheran Church in any case because she is a church of mercy and forgiveness, a church that is glad to include sinners of every description and to call them all to a higher path through the grace of God, because that is what Lutherans mean by that name 'evangelical' that others have used to a very different purpose.

Like Joseph before he became betrothed to the Mother of God, perhaps like B. Penrose Hoover before he became betrothed to the Church at Ordination and married to her body and soul at his consecration, we Lutherans, who prefer to remain faithfully inconspicuous, are going to be in the spotlight of righteous scrutiny because of the turn our life has taken. Like Saint Joseph, and certainly like our dear

Bishop, we will not enjoy the experience entirely, but let us hear the Angel of the LORD calling us to something new in the midst of a life we thought we had ordered to our liking.

One other thought occurs to me with such force and clarity that, while I am neither dreaming nor daydreaming, I believe I can hear and feel the fluttering of Angels' wings: Let us show those who deride us, as the Psalmist lamented in today's Psalm, what it really means to be *evangelical*, not only by praying for our Bishop daily and refusing to judge him, but also by living the Gospel of forgiveness in steadfastly supporting any and all among us who suffer from addictions such as alcoholism, in our congregation and in our community, in our circle of friends and family and among our coworkers. To that end, I intend to ask our Congregation Council at its first meeting of the New Year to undertake contacts with AA and NA, Alcoholics

Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, to see whether our Congregation may not become a sponsor and shelter for their work. Most certainly this is the work of Christ in which our Bishop is leading us by his example, for which thanks be to God! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from ours sins by His blood and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and for ever. ✠ Amen.

