

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 18, 2016  
Advent 4  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 7:10-17  
Psalm 24:1-7  
Romans 1:1-7  
Matthew 1:18-25

We find ourselves today deep into the Advent season, with each passing day drawing us closer to Christmas. As is the case each year, we are called on to prepare, to wait actively for Christ's coming into our midst.

We began our Advent season with the warning to be on guard against *complacency*, the attitude that dispels any sense of urgency to work on our interior lives, to make changes in our relationship with God and others.

Then we were introduced to John the Baptist, who warned us of the danger of *presumption*, of depending on past blessings or spiritual experiences to be our spiritual currency in the present, and of thinking that there will always be time "later" to plead for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Last week, we lit the Rose candle -- the candle of joy -- and we stood together against *despair*, that subtle yet powerful condition that tempts us to lose hope, to give in, to believe that the way things are now is the way things shall always be.

Today we are introduced to Mary and Joseph, particularly Joseph.

We've heard the story so many times. While Joseph and Mary are engaged, she becomes pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. For Joseph, the Old Testament law in Deuteronomy afforded him two options. He could sue Mary for divorce and go through the very public and messy legal process. Or he could annul the marriage quietly, spare Mary a very public humiliation, and try to pick up the pieces of his life.

Joseph decides to do things quietly. Then one night he has a dream, and in the dream he is told that something else is going on, that God is at work in a miraculous way. Mary's pregnancy is part of a larger plan, a plan where God wants to do something truly big. In fact, it's so big that the salvation of the world is at stake. It's no wonder, then, that in the dream the angel says to Joseph, "Don't be afraid to go through with this."

Perhaps one thing that hinders us from hearing this story in its fullness is the *assumptions* we bring to it. It can be easy for us to assume at this point in the story that Joseph's decision is a "no brainer." He goes to bed one night in agony with a broken heart. He has a dream where he is told everything will be alright. And then everyone lives happily ever after.

What's left out of that scenario is what might have happened the morning after his dream, when Joseph woke up. In the light of day, when he is awake,

Joseph thinks to himself: *What happened last night? Could this really be true, or am I imagining all this?*

The more he thinks it over, the less sense it appears to make. From a purely logical and rational standpoint, after all, it is physically impossible to become pregnant without having sexual relations. In the light of day, Joseph might easily wonder what kind of dream this really was. Any decision to proceed ahead with the marriage is definitely not a "no brainer."

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a French artist by the name of Tissot stepped inside a church in Paris. He had a profound religious experience in the church, and devoted the rest of his life to painting spiritual themes.

In the Brooklyn Museum hangs one of Tissot's paintings, a portrait of Joseph. The painting depicts Joseph leaning heavily over his carpenter's table. His shop is cramped, with tools and wood shavings everywhere. The windows look out onto the streets of Nazareth, where townspeople go about their business.

But in the middle stands Joseph, his bearded chin in his hand, deep in thought. The painting's title says it all: *The Anxiety of St. Joseph*.

We rarely think of him that way. Even our text tells us that when Joseph woke up from his dream, he did as the angel commanded. But we should not assume that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Joseph was a free human being, not a robot. And I'm not sure what kind of deliberations went on in Joseph's

mind, but I know how I might have felt in this situation. I'm pretty sure that I would have struggled. I'm pretty certain I would have been filled with questions, and with anxiety. Perhaps you would have been also.

If Joseph's experience was anything like ours, there is a fourth component we can add today to our Advent preparation. Of all the things God's people can ill afford (especially during Advent), there is complacency, presumption, and despair, to be sure. But to these three we add a fourth today. To complacency, presumption, and despair, we add *incredulity*.

The word incredulity is the noun form of the adjective *incredulous*. It means: "disinclined or indisposed to believe." Another definition is: "showing unbelief, especially in religious matters."

Synonyms for *incredulity* are: doubt, unbelief, skepticism.

Yes, Joseph worked it all through, and he ultimately said "yes." But reaching that decision was most likely not a straight line from point A to point B. In the middle, Joseph probably had to wrestle with some things. And at the top of the list was *incredulity*. That ache in the pit of the stomach that says, "This is completely irrational."

We pride ourselves on being rational, logical people. I'm sure Joseph was a rational man. So let me ask you something: *If, in the midst of your everyday life,*

*you sensed that God was leading you to do something that was irrational and totally contrary to human experience, would you do it?*

I can't speak for each of you, but I know in my case the answer would likely be "no." I would not base a major decision on something that was irrational.

Joseph said "yes," and took Mary as his wife. But I believe he had to wrestle with and overcome *incredulity* to do it. I believe the demon of doubt climbed onto one shoulder, and the demon of skepticism climbed onto the other, and together they whispered in both ears, "You're a fool if you do this!"

But Joseph said "yes." He could have said "no," but he said "yes." Christ's advent, Christ's coming into the world, didn't begin with a *day*. It began with a *word*. It began *first* when a young woman – and then a young man -- said "yes."

I like to think that one of the things that helped Joseph say "yes" was an understanding that there is a difference between something being *irrational* and something being *trans-rational*. That is, some truths are not so much against reason as they are *above* reason. Some truth *transcends* human reason, because human reason is finite.

Christianity makes such a claim. Christian faith asserts that the Gospel message is not irrational, but instead *transcends* reason. Ultimately, each person who encounters the Gospel message must decide for him or herself. Just like Joseph. Just like Mary.

The Advent season is very much about waiting, about our waiting on God. But there is more to Advent than our waiting on God. *In this Advent season, God is also waiting on us.* God is waiting on us to say "yes" to Him. God is waiting on us to open our hearts and our minds to possibilities that by some standards may appear to be foolish.

As we come to the table this morning, I invite you to lay aside what is perhaps the most difficult of all of the four temptations of Advent. I invite you to lay aside *incredulity*. I invite you to shake off that temptation to believe that human reason alone defines the parameters of our world and our experience. Lay aside the temptation to construct God and the world in your own image. Receive the bread and wine as God's grace to you. Then rise up, join with your brothers and sisters, and watch and wait his coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.