

Matthew 1:18-25

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. We could have sung this as our sermon hymn today, but I don't think Al has the music up on the organ; and "Savior of the Nations, Come," is even better for preparing our hearts for Christmas.

We're one week away, and all signs are pointing us to Bethlehem. One of the biggest signs (pun intended), is Mary who is great with child. What a blessing! And yet, what a disaster...for Joseph. Mary has surely been telling her husband-to-be what the angel Gabriel told her - that the child within her womb is of the Holy Spirit. And his response? "Yeah, right. Sure, Mary; how silly of me to think that you were unfaithful." But he is a decent man; kind and compassionate. So he plans to divorce Mary quietly. He must leave her. How can he be with a woman who is with child by another man? But he will not do this publicly; he'll just silently walk away.

This story took place in history 2,000 years ago, but it repeats itself within the church continually, and will until the end of time. What I mean is this: Mary, sometimes referred to as *Semper Virgo* (*always a virgin*), is in truth always pregnant. She is always with child - the Christ Child. Mary, in this way of seeing her, is the church; and this woman, this pure virgin, is always full of Christ.

And this turns away the "Joseph's" in the world. Had Mary in the Christmas story not been with child, Joseph would not have planned to leave her. He would have stayed with her. This is how so many look at the church today. They separate themselves from this Mary because Christ is within her.

How so? More and more towns are banning Nativity scenes in their public square. They are removing crosses from Christmas trees. They are not permitting Linus to recite the story of Luke 2 in Charlie Brown's Christmas pageant. They are even removing the name of Christ from Christmas. These Joseph's in our world would have no problem with Mary if she was not full of Christ. If the church were to stop preaching the cross; stop witnessing to Christ; stop naming Jesus as the Savior, the world would relax, embrace the church, and not insist on separating from her.

But Mary without the Christ Child within her is no real blessing to the world. Just so, for the church to cease proclaiming Christ is nothing less than to abort the Child Jesus within her womb, and the church becomes useless to her own and to the world. Last week a Christian priest in Italy removed the Nativity scene from their church cemetery so as not to offend Muslims. But the church ceases to be the church when she stops preaching Jesus. What good is Mary without the Baby in her womb? What good is the church when it doesn't want to offend the Joseph's in our world?

Joseph did not at first believe that the child within his beloved was the Holy One of God, the Savior of sinners. But Mary believed. And so if Joseph, whom she loved, were to leave her, she would not, and could not prevent it. She loved the Baby in her womb more than she loved Joseph. She could not help but be with child. Wherever she went, the Child went with her. She never for a moment stopped, nor could she stop, carrying the Christ.

Sadly, too often, you and I are like Joseph. We react in a negative way to Mary who never stops being pregnant with Christ. Every Sunday we hear the same words in church. Every Sunday after we confess our sins, the pastor turns around, and we know exactly what he is going to say. Every Sunday the Sacrament of Christ is on the altar. Every Sunday we hear Law, and we hear Gospel in the sermon. Every sermon is always about Jesus. Mary never stops being pregnant with Christ. And because Joseph lives in our hearts, we think we need a break from it. Why must Jesus be in everything we hear, say, or do here? And like Joseph, we think we need to quietly walk away from Mary; to slip out the back and separate ourselves from the church.

In Matthew 1 we're told that God stepped in. He did not take the child out of Mary; He changed Joseph. His angel appeared to him and told him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him; that the child within her womb was truly the Son of God.

Picture Joseph reacting to this news. What relief! What joy! For two reasons. He did not need to leave Mary; they would be joined in marriage now. And his Savior had come! The long-awaited Messiah was dwelling within the flesh of his beloved Mary. Advent was finally over! Christmas was here. Immanuel! God is with us in the Child within Mary's womb.

God changed Joseph so that he did not follow through with his plan to walk away from Mary. God does the same for us. Just as God brought Mary and Joseph to each other in the first place, so He brought you to your Mary, the church, in Holy Baptism. And when we make plans, like Joseph did, to distance ourselves from our Mary - by coming to church less and less, by becoming less involved, by giving less, by keeping ourselves away from the Sacrament on the altar - God comes to us and tells us the same thing He told Joseph: Do not be afraid to stay with your Mary, for He who is within her is Jesus, your Savior; He will save His people...He will save you from your sins.

After Joseph heard the words of the angel of God, don't you see him rushing to his beloved Mary, taking her in his arms, and asking for her forgiveness? This is what we must do: embrace our Mary; for when we embrace her, we embrace the Christ within her - and ask for forgiveness for how we have behaved.

You know that Mary forgave Joseph. And God, through your Mary, the church, speaks His forgiveness to you. This forgiveness is real - as real as the Baby in her womb went to the cross to die for you. Jesus did this for you; He did this for all sinners. And so this is why we, in the church, can never stop proclaiming Christ. The forgiveness you have from God is also for your family; for your friends; for all people. They will not get this forgiveness - this grace and salvation - out in the world. It's given through Mary because Mary, and not the world, but Mary is full of Christ. And she wants, we want, and more - God wants everyone to come to Mary and embrace her, for then they, we, embrace Jesus.

Whether Joseph lives in your heart, or in your home, God's messenger today is telling you, and all who are dear to you: Do not be afraid to embrace Mary, for He who is within her is Jesus who will save His people from their sins. Amen.