

19A Advent 4 discernment

Poor Joseph. He must have been completely shattered. He had dreams you know. Ordinary kinds of dreams but for him they were really big wonderful dreams and they ended up in the dust, broken and stomped on.

He was engaged to Mary. Oh, she was so pretty and there was a spark to her. He couldn't put words to it exactly but when he thought about it, oh.

When she agreed to the betrothal all those dreams and longings began to get real. He thought about their future and how wonderful it was going to be. He loved her, you know, and life was sweet and only promised to get sweeter. But then – he found out she was pregnant – and he knew it wasn't by him.

He loved her, but evidently she didn't feel quite the same way about him. It was like his heart had been ripped out. He wasn't sure what to do. It seemed things weren't going to turn out as he had planned. He didn't even want to think about what to do, but time was moving on and he had to do something.

So he fell back on what he always did when faced with a difficult or complicated decision. He weighed the options.

Okay – they were formally engaged. That was serious. The only way out was divorce (or death) and divorce was a possibility so on the one hand he could formally divorce her. Or, if he didn't do that, on the other hand he could continue with the marriage.

If he continued with the marriage there was the child to think about. Again there were 2 options: he could give the child house room but treat it like the little bastard it was or he could name the child and claim it as his own, forever treating it just as if it was. But could he trust himself to do that?

OR. If he decided on divorce yet again there were 2 options. He could unleash a twitter storm of shaming so everyone would know he had been wronged, that might feel good. Or he could quietly set her aside. He thought about it long and hard and finally decided the quiet divorce was the best for everyone involved.

And you know throughout the centuries that decision has been confirmed as a compassionate one.

So, Joseph was done. His decision was made. Except, he was a person who lived with an openness to the movement of the Spirit of God. So maybe he wasn't quite as done with his decision making as he thought.

Not all of us live that way, you know, open to the prodding's of the Spirit.

In the first reading from Isaiah we hear about King Ahaz. In this little snippet he sounds kind of pious saying he “will not put the Lord to the test.” but if you read more about him, especially in 2Kings ch 16 – nah, he wasn’t! What he was though, was frightened.

The southern kingdom of Judah – his kingdom was under attack by two other countries. He weighed all the options and decided an alliance with the empire of Assyria would offer the best protection against those who were attacking.

God, though was trying to get his attention.

Look God says. There is a young woman who is about to have a child and she will name it “God is with you” and by the time that child is 2 years old those countries, those enemies you so fear will be nothing.

But Ahaz preferred to listen to his own fears, and probably his own pride, and ignoring the signs from God and making the alliance with the Assyrian Empire sowed the seeds for the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and the exile of the people of God.

The good news for all of us, though, is the sign from God was true. God did and does remain “with-us” no matter the disaster.

I wonder if remembering the stories from Isaiah and 2Kings helped Joseph as he was weighing his options. There really weren’t any good options, no options he wanted. I wonder if he prayed “help me Lord, help me know what is best to do and be with me in the outcomes.”

Maybe, because what we do know is he had a dream. Now maybe in that dream someone who could only be an angel gave very clear instructions. Maybe. But most people’s dreams aren’t like that.

Most of us have dreams that are kinda crazy and full of weird stuff. When we wake up remembering them we are not sure what they mean. They can take a lot of puzzling out.

I suspect that is what Joseph had to do as he considered the possibility that maybe his first decision wasn’t the best one after all and instead he should decide to go with one of the other options.

Jan Richardson has written a blessing for times like the ones Joseph and the people of Ahaz’s destroyed kingdom were facing, times we all face now and then. It is called a “Blessing when the world is ending.” (pg. 34 *Circle of Grace*)

What the blessing is about, what Joseph did, what Ahaz refused to do is called spiritual discernment. It is a discipline which all who are called to be saints, Paul’s fancy word for all of us - oh you, God’s beloved - it is a discipline we are all called to practice.

It begins with the assumption God is active in the world and God speaks to God’s beloved. That is an important assumption. God is active in the world and God speaks to God’s beloved.

It also assumes we beloved want to listen and respond.

The tricky part is, we can never really be sure we have heard correctly. That is the faith part.

And I'll tell you a secret you already know – discernment often begins in a place that feels oh so empty to us, a place where the world has ended, all our happy expectations dashed.

I suspect our times of discernment sometimes begin at a place that feels pretty empty for God, too, when it seems things might not turn out as God planned.

But then again, the God who is always 'with-us' is the God who knows all about living in hope. Discernment is us saying to God: Here I am. What would you like of me?
And God replying: I'm here, too. And this is what we need to do next. Are you coming?