

Now A Good Word For Joseph

December 20, 2009

Richmond United Church

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:1-7

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Matthew 1:18-25

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Our waiting time is almost over. We end it with two stories of exception.

Isaiah is called by the king. The King is worried. Like many of us he is worried about the wrong things. He has been focused on issues that are transitory and missed the bigger problem waiting there in the future of his kingdom.

Isaiah tells him to use the waiting time to change his vision. To become a king that cares for the people. He has a gift of time to rearrange his priorities and if he does not use that gift of time then bigger problems will come. For at the edge of his perception is the gathering of the forces of destruction. The question is whether he will use that time?

It is a story of focus, about what is important. A story of looking for a new path. It is about finding the vision and courage to leave behind dead end ideas. Isaiah is pointing to the power of dreams and visions that bring hope. A vision to work for a better world. It is to be in harmony with the aim of God which is directed to the well being of creation. It is to take this dream seriously, that we can change and respond to real issues rather than those surface and trivial problems. It is to ask what is really important.

Then there the Joseph story. As Leonard Cohen put it, some Joseph slouching toward Bethlehem. This story is full of unhappy campers - Joseph being one. When we read behind the lines, we see how the Gospel writer made Joseph every man. He had to come to terms with the demand placed on him. He didn't ask for this.

When we understand the context we see what is stake for Joseph in this unexpected pregnancy. It was the custom for a young woman who is engaged to be brought into the man's family. Joseph finds that before this could happen Mary is, in those old words, with child. The story teller wants us to grasp Joseph's dilemma by the suggestion he is not the father. This is a life and death problem in an honour/shame society.

This something that is understood in the words of the old medieval carol - The Cherry Tree. Joseph is angry. He feels betrayed. Feel that betrayal. That feeling gets us to the power of the story. For his choice, and his only choice, is to take her to the village square and expose her. If he does not do that then his place in the

community, his families place is one of dishonour - he can be shunned, lose his means of economic survival. The correct, and moral thing, is to expose her for her shameless behaviour.

Yet his first impulse is not to do this. He says he will deal with her quietly. Quietly break off the engagement. This is paradigmatic shift, and earthquake in human action. To deal with Mary quietly would have challenged the values of his time. Yet there is more.

Joseph has a vision - a dream. Joseph has, in the story, an encounter with the aim of God which builds on his compassion. This aim of God, with which he cooperates, takes him into new places that transforms reality. He takes Mary as his wife.

This is so counter-intuitive, so counter to the values of his time that it changes the nature of righteousness and being honourable. Our problem is we don't quite get his radical birth story. We debate it by saying did it happen the way it is told.

When we look at the story as Matthew conceived it, using the templates of his time, it is about an event that turns the world upside down. This birth story is unlike any other birth stories that have been told down through time. It reverses all expectations. A new reality slides into being. There is a scandal at the center of the story. There is vulnerability in the actions of Mary and Joseph. The Divine reality is located in the messiness of ordinary experience. The Divine Love identifies with creation and is dependent on human response. This Divine Love has a vulnerability at the center of its reality.

This so simple yet profound, this Joseph story. His actions are built on his first intuitive response. This is to act with compassion to this woman who is a scandal. He takes a leap of faith because he is grounded in his experience of God. He is able to trust God, because he is a righteous man, he is grounded in his faith in God. This grounding opens him to new understandings of what it means to be righteous and he does the unexpected thing, an action that is in itself is a scandal that brings new life and transforms history.

It is often the person who stands in the background - called the fifth business in drama - who becomes a crucial figure for change.

My mother was the person who got called a saint. Yet I see my father in the Joseph role - a role of hospitality. My mother had cancer and the doctor told her not to marry. But my father was insistent - thank God - live fully now, let us marry. My house was full of aunts and uncles and cousins who came from the farm to go to school. It was the quiet patience and support of my father who made this possible. It was the thing to do, to offer hospitality that was part of his identity. His openness supported my mother's compassion for an open house where all were welcome.

All of us have this Joseph in us, if we pay attention to the dream of an inclusive and welcoming community. All of us can respond by doing little and big acts of compassion. Those acts are cumulative, they grow, both in us and in the communities that are created by our actions - where the dream of the common good motivates our actions.

When we pay attention to our dreams for a better reality, we find the hints of light, When we pay attention to our dreams then that sparkling reality can slide in. When we listen to the divine lure, our actions become

transformational. When we attach ourselves to this reality sliding into existence, we can do extra ordinary things: change customs, claim compassion.

Listen to Joseph's response. He does the unexpected thing and that action lets in new life, the divine enters human history to give the Light which we know as hope and joy and peace and love. We can do that as well. Through us God's dream can become a reality.

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