

Fourth Sunday of Advent – A

All the themes that we find in Matthew's Gospel are already present in the story of his birth: the conflict with entrenched power, the proclamation of the Gospel to all the nations, the fulfillment of ancient prophecy—they all find their place in the opening chapters.

From that perspective, you could say that the story of Jesus' birth is like the overture to a symphony.

Today's reading provides one of those themes as well. The scandal of the cross is preceded in the story of Jesus' birth by the scandal of Mary being found pregnant with a baby which is not Joseph's.

That presents Joseph with a profound dilemma: the Law requires, at least, that he not go through with the marriage. To do so would be to dishonor the royal line of David.

In his righteousness, Joseph recognizes that, along with justice, mercy must also come into play, so rather than expose Mary to the Law, he decides to divorce her quietly. He can do that. He doesn't have to say any more. He does not have to subject Mary to the shame of a public hearing.

Joseph, the righteous man, provides us with a principle of action that still has its place: respect the person while at the same time not undercutting the

purposes of the law.

But Joseph never gets to carry out his plan. Instead, he is introduced to a new plan: He experiences a divine communication in a dream. In that dream he himself receives the news of what God has in mind.

The essence of the angelic communication is that a deeper plan is at work and Joseph is a part of it. His role is to shelter Mary and name the child Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins."

A number of things happen if Joseph names the child:

- Because Joseph is of the house of David, the act of naming Jesus and claiming him to be legitimate makes Jesus also a son of David.
- Naming the child also brings clarity to Joseph's efforts to bring love into the world of law.
- The very presence of the child is an affirmation of the path he was going to take, and an encouragement on the path that now lies before him.

St. Matthew also supplies us with the deeper reason why Jesus will save his people from their sins:

Jesus is "Emmanuel – God-with-us."

Forgiveness of sins is the effect of God's presence.

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Therefore, the people who will call him Emmanuel are those who, through him, have been liberated from the bondage of sin.

In St. Matthew's vision these people will be members of many nations.

Jesus will be the inheritor of the promises of the house of David, but because he is named "Emmanuel" God's intention to save all people becomes clear.

Cue the three wise men from the East.

When Joseph wakes up, it's more than from physical sleep. He now perceives the divine dimension of what is happening.

Mary's condition is not scandal but Spirit, and so he takes her into his home.

This is the path of a righteous Jew becoming a follower Jesus. He has to move from a perception of scandal to a perception of Spirit.

The same exercise will be needed when Jesus, the anointed one, is executed on the cross.

It can happen in our lives, too. If we attempt to live out our lives according to the conventional approach to religion—saying our prayers, but not listening to the Spirit, making judgments based on what we know

without bothering to ask if there's something at work that we don't know,

we could make a big mistake, and miss the moment when that new thing God is about, makes its way into our world.

As we enter into the time of year more than any other when traditions abound, can we leave room for something new that God might be trying to insert into our lives?

That would be to follow in the footsteps of Joseph, and Mary, and all those others who have come to discover that God-for-us, Emmanuel, is a God of surprises, who feels free to go beyond the law when love dictates so.