

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2016
Holy Spirit (HG)

Is 7:10-14
Rom 1:1-7
Matt 1:18-24

I. What did Joseph look like?

As you ponder that question, what image comes to mind?

- perhaps an older man, with a gray or white beard, perhaps a little stooped over: maybe more like a grandfather figure?
- or was he young and vigorous, strong, a hard working man: filled with hopes for his future wife and possible family?

Even though our popular imagination in our tradition, and most art, depicts Joseph as an older man, there is no scriptural evidence and no reason to think he was much older than Mary. He may have been young like Mary, looking to the future with hope, excited and eager about life.

What scripture does tell us is that he was a “righteous” man – meaning he was a man of integrity: he wanted to do the right thing. Scripture does teach us how he responded to God’s will.

II. As I pondered the readings for today, I found myself attracted to St. Paul’s reference to the “obedience of faith” in his introduction to his letter to the Romans.

Paul begins his long letter with this very formal introduction. As he talks about himself, he says,

*“...we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the **obedience of faith**, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ...called to be holy.”*

What is meant by “obedience of faith?” It must be important because Paul uses this expression at the beginning of his letter and at the end.

The word obedience or, “to obey,” comes from the Latin, “ob-audire,” to hear or to listen to. To obey means not just doing what others tell us without reflection; it means we respond to legitimate authority by truly listening to what is expected and allowing ourselves to trust that it is proper and good.

In this case, Paul listened to faith – and he is asking others to listen to faith – and St. Joseph is an excellent example of someone who truly listened – and obeyed what God asked of him.

III. Joseph finds himself in quite the quandary: Mary is expecting and he knows the child is not his. What is he to do? Follow the strict dictates of the law and allow Mary to be stoned to death? Or, find some other way. He decided to keep it quiet and divorce Mary privately. But then an angel reassures him that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit and it is okay for him to take Mary into his home.

Joseph was truly listening and placed his trust in this message.

Later on, after Jesus' birth, Joseph again responds to a revelation in a dream and takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the murderous actions of Herod.

Then again, Joseph responds to another dream and returns his family to Nazareth.

We get the image of a man who *listened*. As he went through his day, working in the shop, caring for his family, we can perceive Joseph as a man with his heart and mind always aware of God's presence, always attentive to what might be next. By listening to the promptings he felt, Joseph was able to overcome his doubts, his hesitation, his fears – and humbly obeyed what he felt was God's will for him and his family.

IV. Being obedient to faith means we listen to what faith asks of us. Faith, if it is authentic, is a living, breathing part of who we are. It is not static and unchanging, but always keeping us oriented to God and the things of God.

- discerning one's vocation, a certain direction in life is certainly an experience of *listening*, of determining through prayer and reflection how I am to live my life
- deciding whether or not to accept a job offer requires listening to how that might play out in living my faith
- deciding how to deal with difficult relationships – be they in marriage or family or abusive relationships – or how best to care for children: dealing with all the stresses and fears that entails...calls for accepting the challenge of doing the hard thing, listening to God for what is best and moving forward in trust
- confronting the challenge of temptations to sin, mustering up the courage it takes to discipline oneself is something we don't do alone, but requires listening to God's law and trusting in faith that is what is best for us
- maybe obedience to faith means, for us, finding ways to live faith more deeply, more authentically, with more meaning. Instead of allowing faith to be routine, just motions we go through...we seek to deepen prayer, enter into reflection, participate in retreats, be more attentive at Mass.

All of these are ways of being more obedient to the demands of faith. How can listening more intently help you to live faith more authentically?

V. This fourth Sunday of Advent finds us winding down. Christmas is drawing near. Final preparations are falling into place.

Soon our gaze will drift towards the child and his mother. They are at center stage. But somewhere in the scene, standing to the side, is Joseph. He is the one we are paying attention to today – although he would not want the attention. He isn't the main act – and he doesn't want us to think so. He wants us to focus on Jesus and his mother, Mary.

But we know Joseph is an important part of the story. And we know his listening, his obedience to faith, teaches us some important lessons as well.

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