

## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (Cycle A)**

**December 19, 2004 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I'm a little more mellow now that I'm approaching Social Security age, but there was a time in my life – believe it or not – when I was sometimes regarded as rather outspoken, maybe even a little bit abrasive. When people asked me what I thought – I told them what I thought. Don't ask me what I think unless you want to know what I think.

Now I try to find ways to convey the same message, but a little more gently. There are ill-mannered ways to convey a message, . . . and there are more temperate ways to convey a message.

I am reminded of the six retired Floridians who were playing poker in the Condo clubhouse. Meyer loses \$500 on a single hand, clutches his chest and drops dead at the table. Out of respect for their fallen comrade, the other five complete their playing time standing up.

Finkelstein looks around and asks, "Now, who is going to tell the wife?"

They draw straws and Goldberg picks the short one. They tell him to be discreet, be gentle, don't make a bad situation any worse.

"Gentlemen! Discreet? I'm the most discreet mensch you will ever meet. Discretion is my middle name, leave it to me."

So Goldberg goes over to the Meyer apartment, knocks on the door. The wife answers, and asks what he wants. Goldberg declares, "Your husband just lost \$500 playing poker, and he's afraid to come home."

She hollers, "TELL HIM HE SHOULD DROP DEAD!"

Goldberg says, "I'll tell him."

### **MOVE**

Sometimes there are questions you just don't want to ask because you might not like the answer. You'd rather stick with your own answers. That's sort of where King Ahaz finds himself in today's first reading.

Ahaz was king of Judah. He and a couple of other kings went up to attack Jerusalem. The Lord sent Isaiah out to meet Ahaz, and told him that his enemies were plotting against him – they had it in mind that either he'd make a deal with them or he'd be conquered himself.

But the Prophet told Ahaz not to fear and stay calm. He needed to trust in the Lord. That's when the Lord tried to get to Ahaz. God gives Ahaz carte blanche. "Ask a sign." But no . . . ! Ahaz refuses. "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test."

Sounds pious, doesn't it? Well, maybe not. Ahaz was a powerful king. He had his own plans. He wanted to do what he wanted to do. He'd rather rely on a whatever deal he could work out with his fellow kings than find out what God wanted him to do. He didn't want to know what God had in mind. You might say he was spiritually closed.

But he got a sign, whether he wanted it or not – a prophecy that God will save Israel, the Chosen People. A young girl will be found already with child. She will give birth and give the child a name which means "God is with us," Emmanuel. This child will continue the Davidic line which ensures that the kingdom will not fall to the invaders.

For all his earthly power, Ahaz got a sign of gentleness and weakness. But he wouldn't see it. The king he trusted to protect him conquers him. But of course, the Davidic line continued in accordance with the prophecy.

Ahaz was spiritually closed. He trusted only in his man-made treaty – his own power – and it failed him.

## **MOVE**

Sometimes that happens to us. Here's a sign, whether you want it or not. It sure happened to Joseph.

Joseph had a difficult choice. All his life, probably, Joseph had seen righteousness in terms of obedience to the letter of the law. He *knew* what was right and wrong based on the law.

But here, he's faced with quite a dilemma. He's called upon to change his paradigm from obedience to law to obedience to God – no matter what the law says.

Joseph was obviously a compassionate man. Even when he was planning to "put Mary away," he was going to do so privately, quietly, compassionately.

Maybe that was why he listened for the guidance of God.

Unlike Ahaz, Joseph is spiritually open to hear the word of the Lord, even in his dreams. He had his own plans, like all of us. But they changed. He accepts that his own plans are subject to change by a higher authority.

## **MOVE**

Sometimes it comes down to that for us – take matters into our own hands, or trust in the Lord. As the people of God, we are called to trust in the Lord, even when we have no

guarantees. What if Joseph had acted like Ahaz, trusted his own inclinations and dismissed Mary quietly? What if Ahaz had acted like Joseph, and trusted in the Lord? Who knows how the history of God's people would have been changed?

How often does God speak to us in our dreams? Maybe not in words, but I suppose we've all had the experience of going to bed worried or burdened about something. But sometimes we awake with a clarity and sense of hope and peace that we couldn't find in the darkness of night. Maybe we're so bound up in our own search for solutions when we're awake that we can't hear God's solutions. When we're awake, we're so busy telling God what *we* feel, what *we* want, etc. – we can't hear His answer. So He lovingly waits for us to go to sleep.

In a way, we're offered the same opportunity as Ahaz and Joseph. We have to let God show us what is beyond our own senses and desires and wishes. That's what Faith is.

Faith is a way of seeing through what can be blinding. Awake, in the grip of his own anxiety, Joseph could see only Mary's pregnancy and his desire to separate from her. Asleep, he saw the sign he didn't even ask for.

So Advent might be a good time to put aside our own hopes, desires, ambitions – and watch for the sign, listen for the sign. The message may be very quiet and discreet, if we listen.

## READINGS

### Reading I

Is 7:10-14

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying:  
Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God;  
let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!  
But Ahaz answered,  
"I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"  
Then Isaiah said:  
Listen, O house of David!  
Is it not enough for you to weary people,  
must you also weary my God?  
Therefore the LORD himself will give you this sign:  
the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,  
and shall name him Emmanuel.

### Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

R (7c and 10b) **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;  
the world and those who dwell in it.

For he founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.

R. **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?  
or who may stand in his holy place?

One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,  
who desires not what is vain.

R. **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,  
a reward from God his savior.

Such is the race that seeks for him,  
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

R. **Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.**

### Reading II

Rom 1:1-7

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus,  
called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,  
which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,

the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh,  
but established as Son of God in power  
according to the Spirit of holiness  
through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Through him 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;  
to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Gospel**

Mt 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.  
When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph,  
but before they lived together,  
she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.  
Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,  
yet unwilling to expose her to shame,  
decided to divorce her quietly.  
Such was his intention when, behold,  
the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,  
"Joseph, son of David,  
do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.  
For it is through the Holy Spirit  
that this child has been conceived in her.  
She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus,  
because he will save his people from their sins."  
All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:  
Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,  
which means "God is with us."  
When Joseph awoke,  
he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him  
and took his wife into his home.