

12/18/16 4 Advent A

-- At one time or another, most of us face situations when we have to make a decision, and there seems to be no good choice. And I'm not just talking about this last election.

-- Parents often face this dilemma with adult children who are doing something they don't approve of. It may be that they're living with their boy/girlfriend before marriage and are coming home to visit. How do you react? What limits do you set, especially if they're staying with you?

-- Or it may be the actual choice of a spouse they make. Perhaps they decide not to get married in the Church. Or the fiancé is previously married. How do you respond? Any alternative often has its problems.

-- Joseph faced a situation much like that. He was betrothed to Mary, and that was a legal relationship (not like being engaged today). He found out that Mary was pregnant, and he obviously was not the father.

-- He could have brought public charges against her to save face. But she would be legally guilty of adultery, and could be stoned. Or he could arrange a private divorce in front of two witnesses. He would move on, Mary's life would be spared but she and her child would be shamed. Neither was very appealing, but he decided to choose the second option.

-- But that was not the end of the story. God had other things in mind for him. In modern terms, God told him to sign for paternity, taking Mary's son as his own. Of course, this would sully his reputation, because people could count months then just as they can now.

-- Joseph trusted God. That's hard to do when the implications aren't so pleasant. King Ahaz had trouble trusting God when he was told by the prophet to stand firm and not sell out to Assyria for protection when enemy forces were bearing down on his land.

-- There are occasions in our own lives when not taking action (at least immediately) is the best course of action. Often, God's purpose will be clear to us over time, but we have to be patient.

-- Joseph has shown us how to be open to God's promptings in our lives. He was a man of prayer, but he also used a good discernment process. He learned to allow God to lead him where God wanted him to go.

-- Hearing Joseph's story reminds me of a couple I met while preparing them for marriage about 29 years ago. She had never married but had a five year old son. Her son was a handful, and had been kicked out of our kindergarten at the parish I was serving.

-- He proposed to her, intending to adopt her son once they were married. She and her son had to move across the country since he was living and working in Seattle.

-- It was difficult at first, but they adapted. Her son was still a handful, and eventually they had two more boys. I now count them among my very best friends.

-- This past year they faced a new challenge as she took treatments for breast cancer. So far it looks good but, as many of you know, that can quickly change.

-- Most of you have similar incidents which have taken place in your families or among your good friends. Mary and Joseph were not some picture postcard people out of a storybook tale. They faced difficult issues and challenges from many directions.

-- What was notable about them was not their circumstances. What was notable was how they faced those issues with trust in God and practical discernment.

-- God's grace was there for them. But it is also there for us as we face the inevitable challenges of life. With prayer and trust, we can meet those challenges. God will accompany us on our journey.