Our readings today offer us two stories of faith and trust being tested. First ... a little background ... After the death of King Solomon, his son, Rehoboam sat on the throne. The son was as foolish as the father had been wise. Ten of the tribes rebelled, broke away and established a new kingdom ... the northern kingdom, called Israel ... while the old kingdom ... the southern kingdom ...hereafter would be called Judah. The kings of Judah were mostly evil, whereas the kings of Israel were all evil ... no exceptions!

Forward 200 years ... when Ahaz, of the line of David, was king in Judah and ... Isaiah ... was God’s, prophet. King Ahaz had done ... and had led his people into ... all manner of evil. He had even sacrificed ... his own son ... as a burnt offering to the Canaanite god ... Moloch! Now ... Israel, allied with Aram ... now modern Syria. They waged war against Assyria ... now part of Iraq ... and they were trying to force Judah to join them in this war. But Ahaz, wanted instead, to ally Judah ... with the much stronger Assyria. The Lord sent Isaiah to warn him against this. Isaiah preaches, instead, that he should put his trust in God. He even offers: "Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!" But Ahaz ... not wanting to listen ... and trusting in Assyria rather than God ... answered, “I will not ask!” So Ahaz, against Isaiah’s warning, joined with Assyria and warred against Aram and Israel and ... Judah ... at first an ally ... would ultimately become merely a vassal to Assyria ... completely subject ... both politically ... and spiritually! Ahaz failed his test of faith and trust in God ... miserably ... and Judah ... paid the price.

Forward now ... another 700 years ... to the time of our Gospel. ... The normal Jewish marriage would come about in three steps. First would come the engagement, often made when the couple were only children. It was arranged by the parents ... perhaps with the help of a professional matchmaker ... often without the couple ever having even seen each other. Second would come the betrothal, a ratification of the engagement. Once the betrothal was entered into, it was absolutely binding. It lasted for one year. During that year the couple were known as man and wife, although they did not yet ... live together. It could not be terminated in any way ... but divorce. The final stage was the marriage proper, which took place at the end of the betrothal year. Mary and Joseph were in the second stage ... betrothal. Joseph was likely counting the days until he could bring Mary into their Home and begin a life of wedded bliss. Just imagine how crushed he must have been when he found out his betrothed ... his beloved ... was pregnant. We don’t know the exact time that Joseph became aware of this, but I think we can assume
that Mary was showing. I'm sure he felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. His dreams were suddenly shattered! He must have been angry and confused! Why had this happened? How could he face this betrayal? What was he now to do? Mosaic Law said that a woman found in adultery should be stoned to death and Joseph was a just man who respected and obeyed the law! but despite everything he still loved her and did not want to make a public example of her. Of course there was absolutely no way he could marry her ... his integrity would never allow him to marry an adulteress and pretend this child was his. So he made the heartbreaking decision to divorce Mary quietly. And then God's messenger told him not to be afraid and to take Mary and her Child into his home. The angel went on to explain that the child was indeed fathered by God Himself! And as impossible as this was to believe Joseph believed and he trusted!

And so he took his beloved into his home but this story is far from over. In the days to come we will hear how he learned that he and his very pregnant wife must travel some 90 miles, in winter, on a donkey, to enroll in a census so he could pay more taxes. But the Child was God's so again he trusted that God would protect them. And when they reached their destination there wasn't a room to be had so they had to settle for a stable still he trusted. You would think all this would be enough but no! The child had barely been born when the angelic messenger returned and told him that the jealous king wants the child dead and they must flee to Egypt. And once again Joseph trusted!

Of course it would be remiss not to mention all the many times our Blessed Mother believed and trusted in the Lord. But I think perhaps most of us might have a bit harder time identifying with her most extraordinary faith. After all she was conceived without sin. I am pretty sure none of us can say that. But Joseph was just one of us a good man just trying to make righteous choices just trying to do the very best he could. So I think most of us might find it easier to accept Joseph as a role model. But that bar is also set high. Following his example is not easy by any means. Joseph passed test after test. How many of us could have passed those tests? Our challenge, as it was for Ahaz as it was for Joseph is to listen to the voice of God believe what He tells us and then trust in God in every aspect in our lives. Ahaz failed ... Joseph passed. How have we done in the past? How are we doing now? How will we do in the future?