

Homily

Fourth Sunday of Advent - December 21, 2019

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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, **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?