

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year A

Isa 7:10-14

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

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-24

Michael F. DiGregorio, O.S.A.

What is described in today's passage of the Gospel, it hardly needs saying, was a most extraordinary experience for Joseph. As a devout Jew, he had lived his life until then in the expectation of the coming of the Messiah, as all of his people did. How could he have possibly imagined, though, that he would play a central role in his appearance! His life – and that of his future wife – would be changed forever from this day forward. Yet, at the same time, the change probably went completely unnoticed by those around them. Joseph continued to be a carpenter, working day after day to support his family, and Mary kept her home in the simplicity and relative anonymity that characterized other Jewish wives and mothers of her time. The angel's announcement did change their lives, but it did not change the conditions in which they lived, it did not increase their wealth or raise their status in the synagogue or society.

If we listen carefully to the story as Matthew tells it in the Gospel today, we might be struck by his rather matter-of-fact attitude toward it all. An angel appears in a dream. We don't know how Joseph recognized him as a heavenly messenger - whether with wings and a halo as poets and artists often depict such beings, or perhaps as Clarence appeared to Jimmy Stewart in "It's A Wonderful Life."

The breaking of God into the everyday routine of this simple Jewish couple's life was both extraordinary and down-to-earth: extraordinary in its impact on their lives and on all of history; modest - even casual - however, in its outward expression. We do well to remember that it is the long experience of Christian devotion and tradition that are largely responsible for painting the Christmas scene for us in the warm, romantic tones that we have come to know well and find so appealing.

As was probably the case first for Mary and later Joseph, for Elizabeth and Zechariah and all those who have important roles to play in the story of the Savior's coming - the extraordinary did not always **seem** extraordinary outwardly. I think that matches the human experience of many of us. When married couples tell of how they came to meet, fall in love and choose one another in marriage, there is usually no dramatic, overwhelming sign indicating "this is the one"; when priests or religious tell their vocation stories most of us will say there were no bells that rang or voices from heaven that made it clear to us that this was the path we should follow; most people who undergo conversion experiences are not knocked off a horse, or struck blind. In all of these things, usually the **manner** is ordinary, but the experience is exceptional.

Where we expect to find God in our lives is important therefore. If we wait for astonishing signs of his presence, we may miss a lot. If, however, we are attentive to what is going on inside, in the experience, we will have the opportunity to meet God over and over again in life. That's why Jesus can say, 'what you did to the least, you did to me;' and 'this bread is my body, this wine is really me.' The **manner** is ordinary, but the experience is exceptional. When we look for God in

life, let us look in the right places. He tells us he is with us always. We touch him everyday. But we must see with the eye of the heart which alone can recognize in simple things, that which is truly divine.