



Second Advent Candle

Have You Ever Struggled to Accept Your Situation?

If I were to ask you what your favorite Christmas present of all time has been, what would it be? Mine is the bright red Huffy bike I got when I was seven years old. It was full size...there weren't smaller children's bikes back then so that was what I used to learn how to ride one. I don't remember my parents helping me ride it, I just had to figure it out on my own, so I got up on it and started off around the block. I came to the corner and started making my way around it and panicked because of a large shrub at the edge of the sidewalk and crashed, bloodying my knees and elbows in the process. I got up again though and started off making it all the way back home. After several more practice runs, I decided to make the bold move and ride my bike in the street. Off I went. It was smooth riding until I came upon a car parked on the street. For some reason I was like a moth drawn to a porch light and rather than turning away from the car, I turned right into it and struck the side mirror with my handlebar and crashed into the street. The mirror shattered. I got up, assessed the damage and with my seven year old brain, immediately fled home. As soon as my dad found out what happened, he marched me down to the neighbor's house and made me confess my "crime". I am guessing that somewhere in the conversation my dad made arrangements to pay for the damage I caused. I was so traumatized by what happened that I did not return to riding in the street for several days. What seemed so great, a new bike, was not so great at first. It took me a while to realize how wonderful a present it was.

This is the second Sunday of Advent, and it would be valuable to look at the Bethlehem experience for the parents of Jesus, in particular for his stepdad Joseph. Remember how traumatizing it was for Joseph when he first found out that Mary, who was betrothed to him was pregnant...but not with his child. So broken-hearted, Joseph decided to quietly call off the wedding. It isn't clear how he found out Mary was expecting. Perhaps he could tell just by looking at her or maybe Mary told him before she started showing. He certainly did not believe the pregnancy was supernatural in any way. Otherwise he would not have decided to leave Mary. It took an angel coming to Joseph to convince him that the baby Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by any man. **But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."** (Matthew 1:20-21 NIV)

Because Joseph was a man of faith, he did stay with Mary and together they prepared for the birth of Jesus. However, it got tricky as you remember. The Romans required that every male return to his hometown and register for the census. **In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.** (Luke 2:1-3 NIV) It just so happened this requirement came at the worst time possible, when Mary was due to give birth. Off they trudged to Bethlehem, about a five day journey by foot. Perhaps Joseph wondered why God didn't plan the timing of the pregnancy better. No mention is made in the Bible of how either Mary or Joseph felt about this. We can only speculate. It must have been incredibly stressful, that long journey to Bethlehem, not knowing if at any moment Mary might start having contractions on the road there.

When they did make it to Bethlehem without incident, much to the relief of them both, Mary and Joseph most likely were caught off guard by what they faced in the town. Not a single home would open their doors to them; there wasn't one establishment that could provide them a room. Perhaps they thought it would be easy to find a place to give birth. Maybe they convinced themselves they would be welcomed with open arms. It was after all God's Messiah Mary was bearing. Surely God had a special place for them to stay. Have you ever experienced anything like that? You have high expectations of how something will go and then it falls apart. A reunion turns out to be a disaster. A holiday dinner becomes a car wreck. A new job is a horrible mess. You move and it is the worst decision of your life. I wonder if Mary ever cried when they were turned down again and again for a room where she could give birth. This trip was because of Joseph. Was he kicking himself for making Mary go with him to Bethlehem? Did he grow angry with God for not providing them lodging? When Mary Jo and I got married, we thought we would have a house full of kids. After eight years of trying, we felt our dreams of having children together slipping away. Put yourself in Mary's shoes...or Joseph's. How would you have responded to having no place to stay...no clean quiet spot to deliver the baby? This journey had become a nightmare.

Is the cry of Joseph not heard often in the Bible? "God where are you? What should I do? Where do I go? When will you help me?" Was it not how Joseph felt, Joseph the ancient son of Jacob, the father of the nation of Israel who spent twelve years in prison, unjustly incarcerated? Was it not the way Job clearly prayed as he suffered from the terrible illness and grief all the while being accused by his friends of terrible sins? What of Hannah who suffered greatly from her inability to have children? **Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"** (1 Samuel 1:8 NIV) For ten years David ran for his life from King Saul who wanted to kill him. Do you think David felt just as depressed and discouraged, wondering why the Lord did not come to his rescue?

My mother suffered for eight years from cancer and chemotherapy. I am sure she felt like Joseph and Mary going from house to house looking for someone to give them a place to stay, only to be turned down time and again. I recently heard that a fourteen year old boy was shot over thirty times and killed as he was waiting for a school bus. This is more than five hundred murders in the city of Philadelphia. I wonder how many in that great city are crying out to God and asking, "How long?" There is a tremendous amount of suffering and trouble in this world and many millions making the same cry to the Lord, "How long?" Perhaps you have been like Joseph and Mary looking for guidance or help. God does not always provide us a "room at the inn". Sometimes it is a simple stable He has for us. There are times when we have to wait much longer than we planned. It doesn't always go as we thought it would. The prophet Jeremiah protested to God after He called him to be His spokesman to Judah and it went terribly. He was rejected many times by those who should have been his friend.

C. S. Lewis, after his beloved mother died, was sent off by his father to a boarding school where he was mistreated badly and abused. After that he suffered horribly on the front lines as a soldier in World War I. He survived the war and went on to become a scholar at Oxford, yet all his traumatic experiences impacted his thoughts about God. He was an entrenched atheist. It was in middle age that he put his trust in Jesus for salvation and became one of the greatest Christian writers we have known. Can we revisit a great promise made in the book of Isaiah that is too often passed over without giving it enough consideration? **Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.** (Isaiah 40:30-31 KJV) We know of course now that Mary and Joseph did find a place for Mary to give birth to Jesus. It wasn't easy for a while, and it may not be for you. But if you wait for God to see you through what you face, the miracle of Christmas will come to you also. God has a plan for you and for those you love. You too have God there to see to it that you rise. You stand. You run. And you will not be defeated. For as it was for Joseph and Mary, it is so for you. If God is for you, who can be against you.