

Once every 3 years, Joseph is invited to our Advent preparations. He's been offstage, patiently waiting to take his place in the divine drama that is unfolding. Although his time on stage is so fleeting, Joseph is the one who stands in the line of King David. One might ask why he's included in the story at all. I think that is a very good question.

Consider him as the story presents him. Soon he will be married to Mary to whom he is betrothed, and marriage carries with it the heavy responsibility of providing for and protecting the family to come.

But Joseph's heart is because Mary is with child – and he must make a decision. **Not a simple decision either**....to send Mary away quietly, dissolve the marriage contract and leave her to the fate of unwed mothers of that era–

- or to take her as his wife and begin building a family with her – starting with a child who is not his.

We watch as Joseph - the strong silent type - wrestles with this ethical dilemma. I can picture him cradling a cup of hot coffee between his hands, and thinking about the future, a man carrying a great weight on his shoulders. Imagine how painful it is: promises made between them have been broken, and the expectations each of them had for the beginning of their lives together had to be released. Whatever Joseph decides, there will be long term consequences and unforeseen outcomes.

He had to consider the expectations of the entire community. We all know that small villages are often unkind, even cruel, to unwed mothers and I expect Joseph would have been in for some ridicule himself. A fatherless boy in such an environment would also hear the murmuring of the village gossips and the sting of social notoriety. Joseph chooses grace.

Today we encounter Joseph, a man who never speaks and who disappears from this divine drama within a few paragraphs, yet he is a model of character and honor and courage. As the story presses forward to the anticipated birth of a savior, I suspect that we have met Joseph in the flesh, in our small town, or across the table at a family gathering, or maybe as an old friend.

We have all met those who have wrestled with the ethical dilemmas that life throws into our path – where expectations and dreams must be laid aside in the face of the realities which lie before us, -where decisions must be made, decisions with consequences which will affect many into the years to come, decisions with unforeseen outcomes. Where right isn't always easy and easy isn't always right.

We have watched as others have chosen to lay aside personal comfort or gain and choose what they saw as the better, more honorable path. We know people

like Joseph: from small children who show great kindness, to young people who defend and protect their friends, to adults who take on great burdens for the sake of another. We have known people who have shown courage and chosen to trust and to love.

It would be easy to tell the story of Christ's birth without Joseph – and we all know that too often he is portrayed as no more than a Hollywood extra hired to fill in the scene at the nativity. But I think that Joseph exemplifies God's choice to come among us – to take on human flesh – to live among us.

Joseph stands there in the family portrait and represents each one of us – weary and worried, loving and frightened, filled with hope and joy and yet – facing choices that would stymie even Solomon. God asks him to shut out the voices of hate all around him and listen to the voice of the angel. God asks Joseph to consider a new, different, dangerous and unknown path – and to do it for the sake of an unwed mother, an unborn son, and a future for all humankind.

And he does: he trusts that it is God asking this of him and so he acts with courage and honor and love. One day, Jesus will have to listen for the voice of God and trust that the cross is the way of love. He who heard the voice of the divine Father had the example of a human father as a guide.

As the days count down to the celebration of this divine birth, let us get ready to take our places in the divine story – to continue to write new chapters of courage and honor, to continue to provide for and protect the weak around us, to continue to explore new paths in our lives, in our town, among our neighbors. Let us be ready to BE there for one another, as Christ IS here for us.

O come all ye faithful – there is work waiting for us.