

4th Sunday of Advent, A

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What is the most shocking part of today's gospel? What is the thing that makes you wonder whether it happened the way Matthew describes? What is the hardest part to believe? For most people, I suspect, the thing that raises questions, controversy, and debate is Mary's virginity.

Aren't virginity and pregnancy mutually exclusive? How can a virgin be pregnant, let alone give birth? That does not fit with what we know about how babies are made. It just doesn't make sense. There is no rational explanation for Jesus' conception and birth. That's where most of us get stuck with this reading. That's where Joseph got stuck as well. So, he ***"decided to divorce her quietly."***

Joseph has decided to dismiss Mary. He will send her away. They can just go their separate ways and get on with their lives. We shouldn't be too surprised. Isn't that what we tend to do when we don't understand? We dismiss what makes no sense. We turn away from possibilities that don't fit with our ideas, beliefs, and experiences. Joseph knows better than to believe babies are made without a man. So do we. Joseph knows what he believes and believes what he knows. And that's the problem. It is too small. It is too narrow. It is too limiting. I suspect there are times when we are probably a lot like Joseph.

How many relationships have been lost because it just didn't make sense that those two should be together? Race, money, religion, and

families. For whatever reason, we couldn't imagine it ever working, so we never gave it a chance. Have you ever given up on someone because it seemed all they did was offer one unbelievable excuse after another? Did you ever pass up an opportunity or let go of a dream because it seemed too implausible? So, we chalk it up to just another crazy, irrational, irresponsible idea. Have you ever misjudged someone because you couldn't accept their explanations and later learned what they said was true? Think about how many arguments and conflicts are based on different expectations and experiences. Sometimes we assume that if it is not our experience, it cannot happen. It cannot be true, so it cannot be another's experience. Have you ever had that deep sense of joy and excitement about something you wanted to do or be, only to begin hearing the negative chatter? ***“You? No way! That could never happen. You know better than that.”*** Indeed, we have all had those times when we were dismissed and walked away, only to wish we had waited a bit longer, made a different decision, or spent more time asking, seeking, and knocking.

We dismiss people, relationships, ideas, opportunities, vocations, and dreams all the time because we don't understand. Because they do not fit our usual experience or expectations. Because they don't make sense. Because the explanations are unbelievable. In dismissing what makes no sense, that which we don't understand or cannot explain, we are refusing

to open ourselves to something new. Sometimes that means we refuse to open ourselves to God.

Isn't that what Joseph is doing when he decides to divorce Mary quietly? Joseph is dismissing the mystery of Emmanuel, God with us. He is dismissing not just Mary but the Mother of God, the very one who will give God human flesh, a body, the one who makes Emmanuel possible. That's what often happens when we are dismissive. We foreclose the life and opportunities God wants to birth in us and through us.

I am not suggesting that we ought to be naïve or that we should fall for anything and everything. I wonder, though, what we lose when we demand answers and refuse to live with questions. I wonder how often we miss our own lives because we limit them to what we know, what's familiar, and what makes sense, and close ourselves off to the not-knowing, to something new, different, or unexpected. I wonder if we dismiss God by our search for explanations and understanding rather than trusting and entering the mystery.

Ultimately, Joseph took Mary as his wife. However, he first had to move beyond what he understood and what made sense. He had to allow God with us to transcend the limits of his knowledge. He had to let go of trying to put it all in terms of a rational explanation. None of that, however, could happen between him and Mary. It would first have to occur within Joseph himself, and it must first happen within us as well. It is a shift that occurs within us.

Mary and Joseph cannot simply talk it out or work through it. Think about it. Joseph notices Mary's belly is growing. She is gaining a few pounds. He is hurt and disappointed. He is getting questions. *"Where have you been Mary? Who is it? Was it that time I was out of town? Why?"* There is only one conclusion Joseph can reach. There is no other explanation that can make sense of all this. You can be pregnant, or you can be a virgin, but you cannot be both. Mary knows that as well as Joseph. It leaves her rehearsing what she will tell Joseph, deciding when and how to say it to him, all the while knowing he will never understand. How could he? She doesn't understand. It makes no sense to her either.

Matthew, however, doesn't tell us about this or any other conversation. How odd that Mary and Joseph say nothing in today's gospel. Surely there was a lot to talk about. Matthew's omission of those conversations is intentional. Matthew doesn't describe any of Mary and Joseph's conversations because they don't matter. Making sense of this pregnancy, figuring out and explaining how it happened, is not the point. So let me go back to where I started. What is the most shocking part of today's gospel? What makes you wonder if this story is true? What is the hardest part of this story to believe? If Mary's virginity is not the scandal, then what is?

This story's big scandal and shock are not that a virgin is pregnant and gives birth. The real scandal is that God is with us. The shocker is that

God, through Mary, takes on flesh and blood and comes to us. God is flesh and blood, real. That means God is with us in people, relationships, ideas, opportunities, vocations, and dreams. So why would we dismiss them? God is with you. God is with me. God is with them. God is with us in all the circumstances and situations of our life; in joy and sorrow; in celebration and grieving, in success and failure, in hope and despair, and in courage. You name it, God is there with us. That's the point of this story.

Take a moment and look at the last week of your life, the previous month, and the last year. Who are the people you have dismissed? What relationships or opportunities have you quietly abandoned? What dreams have you walked away from? What happened? Why do we do that? Somewhere in those people, relationships, opportunities, and dreams, there was something that made no sense. An explanation was lacking. Something didn't match our experiences or expectations. We couldn't understand what was happening. We didn't know what to do. We couldn't get straight in our heads how it could all work out, so we let it go and walked away. Another quiet dismissal. In the end, we struggled, whether consciously or unconsciously, to recognize and believe Emmanuel, God with us.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Here is the deal. We all live on a spectrum between quietly dismissing Mary and taking her as our spouse. Joseph has shown us that. He reveals to us our dismissive ways, but he also shows us that we can take Mary and establish with her a relationship of commitment, love, and intimacy. That is our final work in this season of Advent. It is our preparation for Christmas. It means that instead of analyzing and explaining how the story could happen, we enjoy its beauty and let the truth wash over us. It means that we are to see people, relationships, ideas, opportunities, vocations, dreams, situations, and circumstances, the entirety of our life, through the lens of God with us. Instead of looking for answers, let's ponder what might be born in us, what needs to be born in us, and what is waiting to be born in us. That's how we open ourselves to the life and possibilities God offers us. That's how we experience Emmanuel, God with us. That's what Joseph did. He took Mary as his wife and opened himself to something new, something different, something unexpected, something unexplainable. He opened himself to the life and possibilities God offered, and he named it all Jesus. **Amen.**