

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Advent

A

12-19-10

This business of Joseph divorcing Mary is a little confusing, so—if you listen very closely—it will be even more confusing!

First, Mary is only 13 years old. How old is Joseph? He is usually pictured as an old man, to protect Mary's virginity. But maybe Joseph is just 17, a teenager--who knows? But only 5% of people lived to be 30 years old, so Joe is pretty young.

Secondly, Mary and Joseph would have been an arranged marriage! They didn't choose each other! Joseph's father would have offered gifts to Mary's father; Mary's father would have made the final decision to give his daughter to Joseph. The two mothers would have negotiated the contract to be sure it was fair. Mary and Joseph would have had no say in their marriage partner. The bride entered the marriage not expecting love, companionship, or comfort; it was an arranged marriage, to bring more sons into the families. That's just the way it was when Joseph was betrothed to Mary.

The betrothal lasted a year, and during that year, the couple was considered already married. If the man died, for example, the girl would be considered a widow. If she became pregnant during that year, it would be considered adultery. And adultery was punishable by death—by stoning. (This goes on even today in parts of Afghanistan.)

It was sometime during that year that 13 year old Mary turns up pregnant. Joseph may have been the last to know. He has three choices: 1) calls her daddy on his cell phone, make an issue of it; the least punishment for Mary would have been shame, banishment from the family; possibly Mary would have been stoned to death. (And if she died, the baby Jesus would have died also!) 2) marry her anyway, which would have meant taking another man's baby—and that baby was the property of the father, not Joseph! ; 3) divorce Mary quietly and hope that the real father will step forward to rescue her.

[How different today, when 40% of births in the US are born outside of marriage! (In 1963, that figure was 7 %.) How different today, when the baby might be aborted, or possibly adopted, or more likely kept by the young girl--and sometimes raised by grandma.]

What does Joseph do? He prays. "God, what can I do? It's not my baby—but I can't let her be stoned to death! God, I'm going to divorce her quietly; maybe the real father will show up. But, if you want me to do something different, you're going to have to give me a sign!" I think Joseph has prayed every day for years. I think he has sought God's will many times. I think Joseph has learned to hear God's voice. And he has learned to do whatever God is asking of him. He watches God be born on our earth.

This is our challenge today: every morning to rise and say, "God what do you want of me today? How can I serve you today?" If 19 year old frightened Joseph can turn to God, why not us? And we have this: Jesus is here this morning, in our assembly, in his Word, in his Body and Blood. What do you suppose he might want to say to us?