

Joseph was a righteous man it says, a righteous man.

This meant that he followed the rules. It meant that he knew what was expected of him as an observant Jewish man and he did what was expected of him.

Remember that at the time that Jesus was born, that people got married when their families made contracts for them to do so. The man would pay a bride-price for the bride and then go get her and bring her into his parents' household. It was an economic arrangement, a contracted relationship. It was surrounded by customs and expectations. One of the expectations was that the woman would not be pregnant at the time that the man and the woman came together to live as husband and wife. You see, there were customs about children and inheritance, the firstborn son inheriting the estate of the father, becoming the patriarch of the family, so a woman being

pregnant at the time of marriage meant that the firstborn son, if it was the first baby, was not really the heir. Being pregnant at the time of the wedding made things very difficult and messy.

It was cause for divorce. The contract was legal from the moment the contract was made and the bride-price delivered, so divorce, a legal consequence, was inevitable, at the time of this Nativity story. It is not a love story, It is not Romeo and Juliet. It is business. And Mary and the Spirit of God put a monkey wrench in the business.

Joseph was a righteous man, so he was steeped in the tradition and laws of his people, of the temple, of the community. So, as a righteous man, he was ready to do the righteous thing and put Mary aside. His decision was not what to do but how to do it. What he had to do, what was the custom to do, was clearly laid out

for him, but the choice was in HOW he was to do it: Would he shame her publicly? Make a big deal out of it? Make sure that she received the full social weight of her condition as an as-yet-not-having-a-husband pregnant woman? We are told that he was going to quietly put her away. So we find out that he is not only a righteous man but a compassionate one, too. He was not going to make her suffer unduly.

Joseph had a dream in which the angel of the Lord gave him instructions. He was given a sign in the form of the dream: God, through the angel, told him to take Mary as his wife and to name the child born to them Jesus.

Let's take a moment and think about the nature of signs from God. In the Old Testament lesson we learn that God told Ahaz to ask him for a sign and Ahaz refused to ask. I find this amusing. If God asked me to ask for a sign, I think that I would ask. I mean how intriguing

would that be: to see what God is up to, what God could do for a sign? Perhaps, though, Ahaz was a righteous man as well and knew what Joseph knew: when God shows you something, you have to do it.

And there is the rub: If God shows us something in a dream or gives us a sign, we need to do it. Sometimes what is shown us is not easy, not comfortable, not something our social self wants to do because the consequences of going against the societal grain are harsh. Mary and Joseph had to endure shame and ridicule, we can be sure, for their situation. Mary was going to be shamed anyway: married or unmarried, she conceived out of wedlock, hers was never to be the easy path. Joseph was asked to stand in this with Mary.

We have thought long and hard, and often, about what it took to be Joseph and Mary in

this story. What we often do not ask ourselves is about the nature of God. The nature of God is like that which Ahaz experiences: God asks us to ask God for a sign: ask me, says God, to show you what I have in store for you.

We don't very often: unless we are in terrible trouble or have a difficult decision to make. In our day to day life we do not ask for signs and we do not recognize very often when they show up. And yet, it seems to me, from this story, that God is at the ready and it is our hesitancy to ask that keeps us from having dreams or signs appear.

Think of it: we often extoll the "yesses" of Mary and Joseph, but we do not remember to remember that God prepared them for the choices that they made by sending a messenger or a dream or a sign. Maybe we are afraid of the yesses we will be asked to make if we are given a sign.

Perhaps our God would say to us, as God said to Ahaz: go ahead, ask.

Our God is a living God, ready to respond, ready to communicate, ready to break into this incarnate world with incarnate words and signs. We can make ourselves ready.