

4th Sunday in Advent

Cycle A, 12.18.16

Isaiah 7:10-14/Romans 1:1-7/

Matthew 1:18-24

THE ANGEL'S HAND IS THERE

You've heard the expression: *If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans*. With just a few days left before Christmas Eve, that's probably a good line to remember. Most likely, you'll find that something you've got on your agenda will not go as planned and you'll have to deal with it. A few years ago I presided at a family wedding at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs the day after Christmas. While it was a joyous occasion once it took place, for the bride and groom, Nick and Megan, my cousin Jeff's son and daughter-in-law, that event had an unfortunate history. You see, they were supposed to get married in June of that year. In fact the date was set, the chapel at the Air Force Academy reserved, the reception hall and caterer received their down payment, airplane tickets were purchased by the guests, hotel reservations were made, all the plans for the honeymoon were arranged – and then, the wedding had to be postponed.

The bride and groom, both senior cadets at the Academy at that time, were to graduate before the wedding. However, Megan had a problem with her final exam in Astronautical Engineering (whatever that is) and had to re-take the class in order to graduate. On top of that, the Air Force does not allow a cadet to get married before graduation - no exceptions. The groom's father, my cousin Jeff, who is a lawyer, went through countless appeals to the Archdiocese of the Air Force, the Academy Administration and the Judge Advocate General in Washington, DC, but they would not budge. (And you think the Catholic Church has some hard rules!?!)



The bride and groom were just distraught over the whole situation, but I appreciated my cousin's fatherly advice to them. He said: *"While it was a real disappointment for our family, and especially the kids, we'll all get through it and make the best of things. My advice to them was that if this is the toughest challenge they are faced with in married life, they'll be pretty lucky (although they weren't feeling lucky at the time!)"*

As I was meditating on today's gospel for this last Sunday of Advent, I thought of the young couple's plight a few years ago – the frustration and disappointment, the embarrassment and anger they must have felt when their plans were dashed, and everything they had hoped and worked for was run into the ground. How much their feelings must have matched Joseph's. All the plans that were in place were now dashed. Mary's sudden pregnancy left Joseph devastated. He trusted and then was betrayed. He made plans and looked to the future, and suddenly the future was robbed from him. Rather than rage and explode, being a "righteous man," as the gospel story tells us, and "unwilling to expose Mary to shame, he decided to divorce her quietly." Who could blame him? He was looking for the best way out of a dire predicament, a situation beyond his control.

Sometimes our plans are relatively trivial and the disruption to them is frustrating: a day's outing gone awry, an interrupted vacation, a wedding that doesn't happen the way it was planned. But sometimes the disruption of our plans is more than frustrating; it's heartbreaking. The marriage that fails. The couple who desperately want children but can't conceive. The much-loved child who grows up, but also grows away and becomes a stranger to you. The work that remains a drudgery. Unemployment. Cancer. The death of someone we love. The hopes and desires that are never fulfilled. An election that doesn't turn out as I expected. It's at moments like these that we should turn to St. Joseph who walked that same painful path. What do you do when things go sour and your life is turned upside down? How do you react to the unforeseen dilemmas that come your way?



For Joseph, it was the message of an angel that restored his faith and gave him the courage to continue. *Do not be afraid to take Mary, your wife, into your home.* God's will was revealed to him through the inspiration of that angel who came to him in a dream. I'm sure Nick's balance was restored by his father's wise advice. We all need divine help when things go wrong for us and that help can come to us in so many ways – the wise advice of a parent, the consoling words of a friend, the help of a counselor, a word or phrase of scripture that lifts our spirits, quiet time in prayer, an insight that comes to us in a dream.

This Advent I re-discovered a Christmas letter by Fra Giovanni, a sixteenth century Franciscan Friar. He wrote it to an Italian Countess on Christmas Eve in the year 1513. As our own Christmas Eve

approaches, it's my prayer for you, for myself, for Nick and Megan and all married couples whose plans don't always go smoothly and to all of us who deal with challenges every day. I believe it echoes today's gospel and offers us the courage to go on, even when disasters beyond our control happen, be they great or small. Fra Giovanni wrote:

I salute you. I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep. There is nothing I can give you which you have not. But there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take. No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today. Take heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace! The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and glory in darkness, could we but see. And to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look!

Life is so generous a giver. But we, judging its gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard. Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the angel's hand that brings it to you.

Everything we call a trial, a sorrow or a duty, believe me, that angel's hand is there. The gift is there and the wonder of an overshadowing presence. Your joys, too, be not content with them as joys. They, too, conceal diviner gifts.

Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty beneath its covering, that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage then to claim it; that is all! But courage you have, and the knowledge that we are pilgrims together, wending through unknown country toward our home.

Those beautiful words from a sixteenth century monk still offer us wisdom and insight when things go wrong, when plans go awry and when we wonder: *Where is God in all that is happening?* With Joseph, let's put aside any fears or hesitations and dare to believe, this Christmas and always, that God is with us, ever at our side.



Fr. John Kasper, OSFS