

Over the past three weeks we've had some wonderful readings encouraging us to wake up and get rid of all the obstacles keeping us from a deeper encounter with Jesus. But let's face it, the readings that we heard today and the ones we've been hearing since Wednesday during the weekday Masses--these are the ones we've really been longing to hear. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. All the Christmas parties, all the lights on houses and trees, Santa, Rudolph, and Guardians of the Galaxy--they are fun traditions but they mean absolutely nothing at all without the birth of Jesus Christ. Hopefully, we have listened to the words of John the Baptist calling us to conversion and repentance. Hopefully the path of the Lord is now clear so that he can come straight into our hearts.

Today we turn our attention from the voice crying out in the wilderness--John the Baptist-- to a man who never spoke a single word in the scriptures: Saint Joseph. Today Gabriel is reassuring Joseph that it's okay for him to take Mary into his home. Gabriel is also encouraging us to make sure we have made room in our hearts and homes to receive Jesus.

Imagine Joseph's surprise when Mary returned to Nazareth from visiting Elizabeth and he discovered that she was pregnant. Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly. Why? There are different explanations and each has their adherents; my preference is the reverence theory. What do we call the vessel that holds the presence of God? It's the Ark of the Covenant, or also, the Tabernacle. Mary had conceived a child by the Holy Spirit; the presence of God was dwelling within her. Mary had become the new ark of the covenant. By the way, John the Baptist testified to this while he was in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. Luke tells us that when Mary went to visit Elizabeth after the annunciation, John the Baptist leaped in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's voice. In the Old Testament, David leaped and danced as the original ark of the covenant was carried into Jerusalem. The church definitely wants us to see the connection between David and John and between the Ark and Mary because when we celebrate the solemnity of the Assumption of Mary in all its glory--meaning we have a Vigil Mass in addition to the Masses of the Day--the readings for the vigil Mass begin with David dancing and end with John's leaping.

There is no record of the conversation between Joseph and Mary but it is reasonable to think that Mary would have explained to Joseph what had happened at the annunciation. Being a righteous man who knew the scriptures, Joseph probably realized the implications of what Mary had told him. Knowing the scriptures, he also would have remembered what had happened on the ark's

journey towards Jerusalem. The ark began to tip over and a man, Uzzah, reached out to steady it—because we all know what happens when the cover is removed from the ark of the covenant: ghosts fly around and peoples' faces melt off. Uzzah was trying to protect the ark, but only certain people were allowed to touch it and Uzzah was not one of them. He was immediately struck dead and David cried out “How can the ark of the Lord come to me” and he decided to leave the ark behind. (Another side note: compare David’s words to what Elizabeth said when Mary visited her.) Being a righteous but ordinary man, Joseph may have felt unworthy to have such a blessing as the new ark of the covenant in his life. He may have felt unworthy to claim Mary as his wife. Perhaps he felt that he could not live up to the task and would bring shame to Mary. So the angel came to him in a dream and told him it was okay: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.”

“Do not be afraid.” That is the most frequently repeated sentence in the Bible. Joseph was chosen by God to protect Mary during her pregnancy and to be a father to her son. Being chosen by God for such a task would be intimidating enough...but doing it in a dangerous world which had already shown great hatred for God’s allies would only add natural fear to the supernatural fear that comes from being in the presence of God. Joseph said “yes,” not in words, but through his actions.

This has been said numerous times already but we cannot hear it enough: God has created each one of us with a specific purpose in mind. We are not here in this time and place by accident. Do you know what God is calling you to do? Like Mary and Joseph and the other heroes and heroines of salvation history up to today, we should not be afraid. God put us here for a purpose and he will always be at our side. In the words of Saint Joan of Arc: “We were born for this.”