

RE-ENCHANTING JOSEPH

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist

December 22, 2019

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

We have been “re-enchanting Advent” this season. Inviting ourselves deeper into the mystery of the incarnation by delving deeper into the mystery of the very real human beings surrounding the incarnation.

Two Sundays ago, for example, our Director of Spiritual Formation and Campus Ministry (Ethel Hornbeck) invited us to consider Mr. Rogers as a modern day John the Baptist. To see his call for radical kindness in the same prophetic tradition as John’s call to change our hearts and minds.

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood,” Mr. Rogers sings. Which is what we learned “enchantment” is really all about. From the Latin *encantare*: to sing over or to sing through. In his singing Mr. Rogers seems to almost demand, by sheer force of will, that we really must figure out how to love God and love neighbor and love self in this country before it’s too late.

Please, God, let it not be too late ...

Our “re-enchanting Advent” continued last Sunday we moved to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her story of singing her way through the shame of unwed motherhood. Of clinging fiercely to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth made possible in the birth of her child. Of becoming “A Mama Bear For Justice” through the words of the Magnificat. Becoming “blessed among women,” as the Hail Mary prayer in the Catholic tradition beautifully describes.

“Hail Mary, full of grace” the re-enchant-ment of Mary continues today. “God is *with* you.” Emmanuel, the prophet says.

And because God is with me, we can hear Mary chanting in response, maybe, just maybe, God is also with you.

But is *Joseph* singing Ave Maria in those earliest days of Mary’s pregnancy, in the gospel text that is our lesson today? Is it “Hail Mary, full of grace, God is with you”? Or is it something closer to “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Because Joseph has—at least to all appearances—surely been forsaken. The woman to whom he is engaged is pregnant before they are married, a scandal even today. Everything about his social standing is at risk, and the consequences to his very livelihood could be harsh. In the honor-shame culture that permeates first century Judea—something completely foreign to anything most of us know—Joseph has literally been un-manned. In this honor-shame culture his honor is very nearly equivalent to his life.

It does not matter to Joseph’s honor how Mary has become pregnant. It only matters that she has shamed him by shaming herself. And in this shaming, Joseph has lost more than a promise of marriage, more than a hope for a life with a woman he might come to love, more than an assurance of

the survival of his lineage into the next generation in the face of Roman occupation. He has lost his honor.

He is forsaken, and Mary is shamed.

By all rights he could execute her for this crime, ending her pregnancy in the process. It would be one way to regain his honor, one way to claim control over a situation that has rendered him powerless. And if he does, if Joseph gives in to feeling forsaken by God and by Mary, Christmas will never come. The five thousand will never be fed. The lepers will never be healed. The demon-possessed will never be cured.

If Joseph gives in to despair, then “God-with-us”—Immanuel—will remain an elusive vision for all those other people in Judea and Galilee and all over the world even to today who also feel forsaken by God. “God-with-us” will just be a nice idea from the prophet Isaiah with no real, tangible evidence. No real person. No real Jesus.

Think about that for a minute.

A world without Jesus.

A world without Mary.

But Matthew’s entire gospel—even Christianity itself—turns on this point: before the dream, before the angel, before the assurance of the Holy Spirit at work in this pregnancy, *Joseph is a righteous man!* And righteousness for him is something altogether different than the honor of his culture. Righteousness for him is about choosing to believe that *God is still with him*, even though he feels forsaken. That God is still with Mary even in her shame. That grace in the face of God’s presence with both of them in their fractured relationship is a more righteous response than regaining his honor. So he plans to dismiss Mary quietly, giving both her and her child a chance to live, and giving himself a chance to move on in peace. Even if Joseph had done nothing else from this point onward, that would have been enough. That would have been a miracle.

But then, of course, Joseph dreams that the Spirit of God is at the center of Mary’s pregnancy—*that God is even with the child that by all rights should shame them both*—and he goes forward with the wedding, and he adopts Jesus as his own, and he protects Jesus from Herod. And in doing all these things for the Savior of the World, Joseph, like Mary, in some mysterious way becomes a parent to us all.

Hail *Joseph*, we should also be singing today. You, too, are full of grace. God is so obviously with you, even when you feel forsaken, even when you feel betrayed. And because God is with you, maybe, just maybe, God is also with us.

And if God really is still with every one of us, then we can curl up in the arms of our Mother Mary and our Father Joseph on this final Sunday in Advent. Gazing at her feminine face of divine grace. Clinging to the righteous dreamer ready to adopt us all. Welcoming the Living God back into this beautiful and good world and precious world.

And shout, "Alleluia! Christ is coming ... very, very soon!" Amen.