

The movement today is away from John the Baptist, Mary or Elizabeth, and turns primarily to Joseph to whom Mary was engaged to be married. So it is no surprise that the candle for the fourth Sunday of Advent is called Love.

Even though this is the only text that Joseph appears with a speaking role, we know a fair bit about him. We know that he was a carpenter from the back water of Nazareth; that he was a faithful Jew; and we know from this text that he had the dignity to not expose Mary to public disgrace - so he was a person of integrity.

We also know that he took Mary, great with child, to his hometown of Bethlehem for the census; and we know that while they were in Bethlehem there was no room at the inn, but they had the fortitude to find some form of shelter for his wife to give birth to their child. It all must have been rather overwhelming.



After the child was born, we know that Joseph, having been warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem because of the danger of an infanticide by Herod, took Mary and Jesus to, of *all* places, Egypt as a place of refuge. So we know that he had the courage and resources to take his trade on the road for the sake of civic responsibility and survival. They became refugees.

We also know that dreams were an important vehicle for Joseph to pay attention to. He was tuned in to dreams as ancient medium of divine communication, a place where the unconscious would sort itself out, so he was a man of deep spirituality. Even though this is the only text that Joseph appears with a speaking role, we know a fair bit about him.

What I find extraordinary about this text is that Joseph is afraid, and with good reason. His wife is expecting a baby, and he knows that *he* is not the father.

“Fear not,” the angel says in the dream, “for the child within her is from the Holy Spirit.” How this information is going to be a source of consolation is beyond me. But the angel in the dream appeals to a sign.

“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God with us.’”

The fulfillment of a sign is the turning point for Joseph. Signs are important things; especially when it comes to things with such weighty significance as forgiveness, salvation, and as the psalm says, wholeness.

Whenever God makes a promise, or a covenant, there is always an accompanying sign to confirm it: with Noah, there is the sign of the rainbow; with Abraham, there is the sign of circumcision; with Moses, there is the pillar of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night, and then there are the stone tablets; with Solomon, there is the ark of the covenant and the temple; with David, there is the throne; and now with Mary there is a virgin birth. This is a unique sign in living flesh. The shepherds have the sign of the babe in swaddling cloths; and the wise men have the star.

And finally for the disciples there is the sign of the linen wrappings lying in tomb, and wounds and hands and side. For us, there is the sign,

given first to the Hebrews leaving with haste from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, and then to the disciples at the passover in the upper room: the ancient sign of bread and wine.

All these are signs that point us to an eternal covenant, established by God, that has to do with deliverance, exodus, protection, freedom and redemption. It is a covenant of Love.

Joseph’s language is in the power of signs. And when it comes to the power of a sign of this magnitude, he pays attention to it. He gets it, and from then on in we know that we don’t need to hear any more from Joseph; because even though he is not the father of this baby, he understands what is at stake here. So he is not afraid to take Mary as his wife, and go to the ends of the world to make sure that she and the child within her will be protected; and it will all come to pass no matter what threatens to destroy it. For Love overcomes fear; hope overcomes despair; and forgiveness heals guilt. So on this long week of Advent Four, may you grow into a deeper understanding of this sign, as one of a series of many signs, that point us to the eternal covenant of Love.