

Isaiah 7: 10-16; Matthew 1: 18-25  
WWJD: What Would JOSEPH Do?

Over the last three Sundays of Advent, in the words of the prophet Isaiah we've had glimpses of the world transformed under the reign of God. These visions have shown us the world where peoples and nations are at peace with one another, and turned weapons of destruction, swords and spears, into ploughshares and pruning hooks, the tools for growing foods. He told of the vision where all creatures, people and animals, wild and domestic, pose no threats to one another but live in harmony, and finally, people are healed of conditions of brokenness and restored to the wholeness of their being. These visions point to God's promised future and the destiny to which God beckons all of us.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, instead of another vision of the kingdom of heaven, Isaiah gives a sign, a sign of reassurance that God is with God's people in this present moment, for the reality on the ground was rather messy, as in international political mess, when Isaiah was working as the prophet of the royal court in Jerusalem. The royal court of King Ahaz, that is. Ahaz was the king of Judah, the southern kingdom, ruling from Jerusalem.

It was common for the kings to consult God, through the prophets, before deciding to go into battles. And King Ahaz was facing an international political crisis. The kings of Ephraim, which is the northern Kingdom of Israel, and of other nations were scheming to replace Ahaz with someone who would go along with their plan to form a coalition against the mightier Assyrian Empire.

Into this concrete political situation, God intervenes for Jerusalem. God invites the king Ahaz to ask for a sign. God says, go ahead, ask for a sign and wait for it, because it is not your military might and political coalition that will save you, but I, your God, will protect Jerusalem. God wants to Ahaz to be in a trusting

relationship with God, in which God could reassure Ahaz through the sign Isaiah would give him.

But Ahaz declines the offer. If he's shown a sign from God, he would have to trust it, when he'd rather trust his own instincts. But how can he say "Thank you, but no thank you" to God? He comes up with a great excuse; he can hide behind the pretense of obeying God's own law. He says "No, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." Ahaz is following the letter of the Law, meaning, he is technically following the law found in the Torah, Deuteronomy 6: 16, which says, "do not put the Lord your God to the test." But he is not following the spirit of the law, because he is resisting God's intention to act in his interest and in the interest of the kingdom of Judah entrusted to him. He's resisting God's loving intervention to save him and his kingdom from the mess they got themselves in.

As foolish as it seems from the sidelines, we do this kind of thing. How easy it is for us humans, to go through the motion of what we think is required of us to be obedient to God, when in truth we are just insisting on our own ways. I wonder if you can remember the last time you'd done something like it. We can deceive ourselves, but not God. Ahaz's unwillingness to receive a sign from God is a failure of faith, but not only that, by resisting God's intention, Ahaz is making himself unavailable to be part of God's larger design.

So, like it or not, Ahaz is given a sign, anyway, and God saves, anyway. The sign Isaiah gives him is a pregnant young woman who is about to give birth, and she is to name the baby, Immanuel, God with Us. The birth of this baby is a sign that God will be with the kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem, and by the time the child is old enough to be eating solid food of curd and honey and know good from bad, the kingdom will be saved.

This sign in the Book of Isaiah, of a young pregnant woman giving birth to a baby she is to call Immanuel, was a sign of God's immanence, God's presence in

the immediate situation that faced Ahaz and his kingdom of Judah. Deliverance will come, not through alliances or military might, but through divine intervention, by a God who keeps promises.

Centuries later, the sign is given again. This time it comes to a certain Joseph, whose lineage is of the house of David, just as Ahaz was. Joseph's reality on the ground was also messy, but in a personal way which turns out to be more than personal. He was engaged to a young woman, Mary, and in those days being engaged was just as serious a commitment as being married.

And he learns Mary is pregnant. Joseph knows he's not the father, so Mary must have been unfaithful. This put Joseph in a great dilemma. He knew what the law required; the Torah, in Deut. 22: 13-30, would have her put to death, though by this time, the practice was to divorce her with public shaming. Joseph was a righteous man, which meant not only that he observed the Law the best he could, but also that he was in the right relationship with God, unlike Ahaz, and had a compassionate heart. Desperate to balance his legal obligation on one and his compassion on the other, he resolves to dismiss Mary quietly, the best compromise he could think of.

It was then, the angel of the Lord appears in his dream and assures him that the child Mary is carrying is from the Holy Spirit and that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, and when the baby is born, he, Joseph, is to name him Jesus, for he would save his people from their sins. Waking up from his dream, what would Joseph Do?

He trusts the sign and the God who gave him the sign. If the sign was not true, Joseph would be breaking the Law by not divorcing Mary. But Joseph trusts the sign from the angel of the Lord, and breaks the Letter of the law, that is, he technically breaks the law by going ahead and marrying the pregnant Mary, but he

was obeying the spirit of the Law, which is always God's loving intention for God's people and the world.

What would Joseph do? Unlike Ahaz who used the law as an excuse not to follow God's will, Joseph chose to listen and obey the will of God, over and against what he knew was required of him according to the law, and in so doing, he made himself available to be used by God in God's greater plan to save the world. Joseph, who was in the lineage of the king David, by naming the baby Jesus, brought Jesus into the lineage of the king David.

What Would Joseph Do? Joseph did not know what would become of this baby, someone else's baby for all he knew, and yet he followed the message from God and, in doing so, he fulfilled his part in God's salvific work to redeem and reconcile the whole creation.

Joseph protected Mary and helped her cradle the child of promise. In the sign of Isaiah, it was the young woman who gave birth names the child Immanuel herself. In the story Matthew tells, it is Joseph who names the child, fulfilling the promise of the coming of Immanuel, God with us.

This Advent, the sign is given to us, again. The babe is being born, again, into our war-weary world. What sign do you perceive as God's faithfulness in your world? What would you do, if you were to trust that sign? The sign always points to hope, peace, joy and love, just as the Advent candles have reminded us.

I wonder what our part is, yours and mine, in making visible the sign of love of God in the corner of the world that we occupy. Like Joseph, we do not know the ultimate outcome or the full impact of our actions, but God surely has a place for us in God's coming future.

What Would We Do? As in What Would Jesus Do and What Would Joseph Do? This is a question of our calling. The contemporary poet David Whyte says

“the call will not come so grandly, so biblically, but intimately, in the face of the one you know you have to love.<sup>1</sup>

And that face of the one we know we have to love, or the one who loves us, will meet us in the manger. Together with Mary and Joseph, and the wise men from the orient and the Shepherds in the field, we will behold the love of God incarnate. Friends. Let us go to Bethlehem.

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<sup>1</sup> David Whyte, “The True Love,” from the House of Belonging (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 1997)