

4th Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2010

St. Margaret Parish, Bel Air

In my last parish, Saint Francis de Sales in Abingdon, there was a problem with the roof of the parish center building. The facilities manager wanted me to go up on the roof with him so that I could see and really understand the issue. Well, I have a fear of unprotected heights and this was about the last thing I wanted to do. But, I did it. I climbed up the ladder on the side of the building and quickly walked to the middle of the roof and froze in place. I saw the problem and within minutes was on my way down the ladder. When I look back at that, what enabled me to deal with my fear and go up on the roof was my trust of the facilities manager and his assurance that it would be safe. By the way, I never intend to go up on the roof of this church. I'll trust the facilities manager so much that I'll just take his word for the condition of the roof.

In today's gospel, Joseph is also dealing with fear. He is afraid to take Mary as his wife, given the religious and social laws of his day. Yet, the angel of the Lord says, "*Joseph, do not be afraid.*" Joseph finds this assurance from God to be overriding – stronger than his fear. Throughout the Bible, there are many incidents like this of persons who are afraid and of God asking them to trust in him. This may not completely remove the fear. But it does enable Joseph and Mary and many others to act positively. Joseph's trust enables him to cooperate in the birth of Jesus. His trust in the midst of fear makes him an agent in bringing God's Son into our world.

All of us can experience fear in certain moments of life. Today's gospel invites us to respond as Joseph does. It calls us to trust God and even with our fear, to act according to God's will.

For example, the fear of not being liked by his peers may lead a seventh grader to join in bullying a classmate. In that situation, even a twelve-year-old is called to trust that God is with him and will take care of him even if he still has some fear. That trust can lead him to refuse to join in the bullying and maybe even to take up for the kid who is being picked on. And in that way, he cooperates – like Joseph – in bringing God's love more fully into this world.

Or the other day I was speaking with a young woman, a wife and mother, who is being treated for cancer. We actually talked about having both fear and trust at the same time. Her faith and trust in God is strengthening her in

all of this. And in that way, this woman is bringing God more fully into this world especially for her family and friends.

Or maybe we have a fear of certain people who are different from us – perhaps today especially the Arab and Muslim peoples. Trusting in the Lord, even with our fear, leads us to read, to listen, and to try to understand their life experience and their point of view. It sets the stage for more reconciliation, harmony, and peace. It enables God's peace to enter our world more fully.

I think what happens is that when we are afraid, we kind of circle the wagons and get defensive and figure we just have to protect ourselves. We can all experience fears that lead us to react this way. When we see this in the Scripture, as today with Joseph, God calls us not to be afraid. Maybe more precisely, God reassures us that he is Emmanuel – God with us. God calls us to trust in him and not allow our fears to control us. If we do this, then like Joseph we can also allow the Holy Spirit to act. We can also be agents for God entering our world more and more fully today.