

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Joseph learned that the right decision was the wrong decision. He was engaged to Mary. We can only imagine how they met, if they flirted, and how their parents agreed to let them become husband and wife. In Joseph's day, the engagement probably took place in the home of Mary's father.

We don't know how Joseph then found out that Mary was pregnant. Did Mary tell him? Did she start to show? Did he overhear gossip? Matthew's gospel simply says that Mary "was found with child," but we don't know who found her that way or how.

Matthew doesn't tell us those details, but he does tell us about Joseph's decision. Joseph probably presumed he was facing a situation like that described in the Book of Deuteronomy (22:23-27), which says if a woman betrothed to one man lies with another man, this is a crime. If the incident took place in the city, and no one heard the woman cry out for help, then both the man and the woman were to be stoned to death. If she didn't cry out, the law assumed she was complicit in the crime. However, if the incident took place in the country, then only the man was stoned to death. Since there were no witnesses, no one knew if the woman had cried out. In the country the law gave her the benefit of the doubt, and the incident was considered rape. The bible does not give us sufficient evidence to know if the punishment of stoning to death for this crime was actually practiced very much. Deuteronomy 24 offered another solution: a man who is displeased with a woman because he finds in her something indecent could write out a bill of divorce and hand it to her.

So, when Joseph learned that the virgin to whom he was betrothed was now expecting, he had two legal ways of dealing with the situation. He could have submitted the complaint to authorize a stoning, or he could divorce the woman. Matthew calls Joseph "a righteous man," and the decision he chose was to divorce her quietly. Joseph thought that was the right decision.

It was then that Joseph in a dream saw an angel, who reminded him he had another option: Go ahead and marry her. This, as it turns out, is what God had in mind.

On Christmas Day we usually focus on the baby, but on this Sunday before Christmas the Church invites us to focus on Joseph. He was a very human male trying to make a good decision in a situation he probably found embarrassing and disheartening. He settled on what he thought was the right thing to do - divorce - only to learn there was a better choice. Normally when we choose well, good results will happen. We may not get the results we were planning to have, but we may get the results that are part of God's plan.