

One sign to me that my move to Cameron has been a personal success is that I got all my Christmas gifts purchased and wrapped a full week before Christmas. This has never happened to me before. I like the security of being ready, but I have this really bad feeling that I've forgotten something. It's when you think you're prepared that you'd better be careful.

I think St. Joseph learned that lesson the hard way. He probably became engaged as a young man with plans for his future. He surely had the approval of his bride's parents, and was calmly getting everything ready for the wedding – the caterer, the DJ, the honeymoon reservations – all those things responsible grooms take care of before the big day. He probably had everything set well in advance. Then this. Mary was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Matthew's gospel doesn't even tell us how Joseph learned this – just that Mary was "found with child." This was not part of Joseph's plans.

It looked like an engaged woman had had relations with someone else. That carried a severe penalty in those days. The Book of Deuteronomy says, "If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife." If Joseph had observed the letter of the law, Mary could have been stoned to death, while she was pregnant with Jesus, by people who did not understand how this had happened.

Instead, Matthew says, since Joseph was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose Mary to shame, he decided to call off the marriage quietly. With that decision, an angel appeared to tell him the truth and to reward his righteousness. It's a remarkable story of a man who showed that love was the most important law. Joseph followed a lesson that Jesus would teach throughout his life.

When a crisis happens, it proves what people are made of. Some of us draw on reserves we did not know we had, while others do less heroic things that are comfortable. A crisis will prove what is important to us.

In the last year, your family has probably seen a crisis or two, more serious than getting the Christmas shopping done on time. When you look back on it, you may discover a well of love you did not know was there. When our country entered crisis this fall, we discovered a well of generosity producing help for those in need. We discovered love we did not know we had, love for our country, love for the hungry, and love for the injured and the aggrieved.

Over these next few days, God gives us a time of grace to celebrate our belief in Jesus and our gratitude for his teaching and example. As we enter these days, let us share our gifts of love and thank God for the greatest gift of all, the birth of Jesus.