

In the name of the Incarnate God, Amen.

At the end of every year, television shows reflect on the year gone by. At the end of 2009, we were treated to a broader retrospective of the last decade. These looks back made me reflect on Jesus' past and Joseph, on whom today we look back and whose story I consider as a great model of faith in action throughout life's journey.

We know very little about Joseph, the adoptive (or "foster") father of Jesus. Throughout Jesus' life, death and resurrection we read about Mary, the Mother of God, but after the opening chapters of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, we never again hear anything about Joseph. He is one of the lesser figures from the New Testament, but one to whom we should pay close attention.

We know from Matthew's brief description of him that Joseph was a righteous man. The word the Gospel writer uses here is the Greek, διακολος (diakalos) which means "conforming to the standard, will, or character of God; upright, good; just, right; proper; ...." That is a pretty good description of what we would consider a person of great faith.

Joseph was also a religious and pious man. Luke tells us that Joseph made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year for Passover – quite a trek to take *every* year. We also know that he presented Jesus for circumcision at the Temple on his 8<sup>th</sup> day of life, as required by Mosaic law; and that as soon as Mary was ritually able to accompany him, he had Jesus at the Temple again.

We know that Joseph was a kind man. When he discovered that Mary was pregnant during their period of engagement, he considered canceling the marriage, but only if he could do it quietly and without causing her to suffer the consequences of her supposed actions in public.

Joseph has most of the attributes of “diakolos.” However, what sets him apart from many other people with these attributes is that Joseph’s faith is a faith of action. In all of the vignettes in which we glimpse Joseph from Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, we see a man on the move. Repeatedly, God calls and Joseph acts.

Here was a man, probably in what we would think of as the middle-class of Nazareth society, a carpenter and faithful member of the Synagogue. He became engaged to the young woman named Mary and then discovered her secret. As a man of action, he intended to quietly divorce her and send her away, but when an angel came to him in a dream and said, “Joseph. It’s OK to marry her. This is God’s child.” Joseph went forward and married her.

Then the baby was born in Bethlehem – after Joseph had to take the trek from Nazareth at the command of the Roman government – he was ready to take the family home when an angel of the Lord came again and told him to take them to Egypt instead. Joseph must have barely begun to get accustomed to the fact that his son was actually God’s Son, when there was another angel telling him to face *more* upheaval in his life. Now it’s one thing to make a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem and leave the home and business for a few weeks. But this time he had to go to Egypt for who knew how long. Most of us would have questioned what would happen to the business. What would happen to our belongings? Where would the money come from to make the trip to Egypt? How would we survive when we got there? But not Joseph. Matthew tells us that he simply gathered the family up and headed for Egypt, leaving everything he knew, owned and cared about behind, and became an unemployed refugee – all on the basis of another nocturnal visit from an angel.

Today’s Gospel account goes on to tell us that the family lived in Egypt until Herod died (a period of a few years by historical account) and then another visit from an angel and back to

Nazareth they went. And Joseph had probably just built up a nice carpentry business in Egypt when he got uprooted again.

So what can we take from these brief snapshots of Joseph? As I said at the outset, he was a man of faith in action. I would submit to you that Joseph is the preeminent example of how one should take a faith journey.

We are all on faith journeys. Look around and think about the stories that the people around you have told you about their own journeys of faith. Some appear to be so much further down the road than we do and some appear to be just finishing the packing before heading out the door. But we are most assuredly all on the journey.

Journeys of faith are never predictable – except for one thing; their unpredictability. We never know when God is going to call, or what we are going to be called to do. Our calls might be as simple as calling us to help out in the church nursery (something that is desperately needed by the way), or as dramatic as a call to pursue ordained ministry. Whenever God calls upon us and tells us that we need to make changes in our lives, it can make us afraid. The future is uncertain enough without making life changes when we don't know if we're ready for it. But God's call is sufficient if we allow it to be. And God will be there with us, providing spiritual and temporal support for us if we are faithful.

My own faith journey has been an incredible one thus far! And through all of my own changes and chances, Joseph has been a great model of faith and quite a hero to me. During all of Joseph's encounters with the voice and will of God, he was never told "why." Nor was he ever given a timetable for when things would level out and become comfortable again. Instead, he was told "what," and that "what" was to get up and get moving. "Be about the journey that God has set out for you." No matter how much Joseph – or we – want to know how and when things will turn

out, each and every time, God finds it sufficient to simply issue the call, without more detailed information.

Perhaps one of the great lessons we are to learn on our journeys through life is that everything is temporary – both the good and the bad. God does not call us to complete a story, but to add a chapter to it. We are never called to a dead end, only to another fork in the road.

The spiritual life is all about journeying. It is about keeping our eyes, ears, and most importantly, hearts open to listening for God's call to us. Unfortunately for most of us, those calls do not come, as they did for Joseph, in the crystal clear vision of angels in the night. For us, it involves being quiet enough to hear that still, small voice inside. But if we listen hard enough, and pay enough attention, we will get the message that we are to pick up our belongings – whether literally or figuratively – and get on the road to the next stop; not the destination, only the next temporary stop. And when we get there, it is time to set up shop and begin to listen for the next set of instructions and to await the beginning of the next leg of the journey.

I am quite certain that Joseph never imagined what lay in store for him when he was originally approached with the idea of marrying the young virgin girl from Nazareth. I know that when I was a twenty-one year old Air Force Sergeant, newly wed to the love of my life, in my wildest imagination I could not have conjured up where Donna and I would be today. But that is the wonder, the mystery and the excitement of the faithful journey through life.

As you enter this new year, pay close attention to your own visiting angels – in whatever form they may take – and keep your senses tuned to the frequency of God, so that you don't risk missing the next call to get up and head down the faith road, confident that while you don't know exactly where the next fork leads, you do know that you are always journeying nearer to God – and that is what it is all about. Amen.