Fourth Sunday of Advent, Cycle A

Although I believe myself to be deeply **empathetic**

 With feminist instincts, esp. round the **dignity** of women

 And believe that church and society

have yet to give women their due

 actually even raised by feminists

 college of St. Catherine

 I admit that society and the church and gospel of Matthew

Could be accused of patriarchal

 Since over the past two weeks

The center of the advent gospels

Has been that paradigm of machismo - the Baptist

And while t this time of the season

When texts and images should **pivot to the Virgin**

Recently celebrated as the Immaculate Conception

And Guadalupe

Instead, **today’s gospel** turns towards

**Another unlikely male advent image**

someone the church honors immensely

But whom we reflect upon very little = Joseph

Now I am no Robert Bly - or “iron John” fan

 And actually, in the hope of undercutting it such **machismo**

 it might be useful to spend some time

 Reflecting on the Joseph of the gospels

 As the very **redefinition of Advent**

Maybe he was **17 years** of age

 Not the bearded, aging image so common in the church

 Certainly an adult by the standards of his society

 But a very young adult

In today’s parlance = a **good kid**

I imagine him a junior in HS

 A kid who had to bear the weight

 Of foster parenting the son of God

He was, of course, in an **arranged marriage**

 No evidence that he chose Mary as his wife

 Seldom did that happen in that era

 Arranged by families

 So he’s marrying someone he may not know at all

On top of that he finds out that his betrothed

 Is **pregnant by someone else**

 Something which happens in the very process

 Of **finalizing the marriage agreement**

*So we have a 17-year-old*

 *In an arranged marriage*

 *Who discovers his betrothed is already pregnant*

 *And since he* ***never took a course in Trinity***

 *don’t know what he understood about the Holy Spirit*

Obviously, this **saintly kid** has some anxieties

 Evidence is that he appears to be having **nightmares**

 *Or whatever you want to call it*

 *When God’s angel shows up in your dreams*

 Delusions? Revelations?

But he knew that there was **some power**

greater than himself at work

**maybe he saw it in her eyes**

when he took her into his home …

 who knows what the **neighbors** thought

 or what his **parents** thought

 about this already pregnant girl

 now living with their boy **probably in the family home**

 *but he acted justly, he acted justly*

*and the mystery of incarnation was allowed to unfold*

 if he had **not** acted thus,

 who knows what **might have transpired**

 whether the life of the mother and child

 would have been **snuffed** out

 in an act of **biblical justice**

the law called for his bride to be **stoned to death**

 an unspeakable loss to all of human history

 not to mention the end of salvation history

 *but he did act*

 *and the mystery of incarnation continued to unfold*

But these **personal traumas** are not all we know about Joe …

 who lived in country **run by a military regime**

 Like the way hundreds of millions of teens today

 His freedom of movement was restricted

 His freedom for self-determination was limited

And thus, as the gospels will soon reveal

 against his will to **fulfill a Roman political mandate**

he took his very pregnant wife *80 miles*

 From Nazareth to the hamlet known as Bethlehem

 Ordinarily a **4-day journey** …

 But given Mary’s pregnancy

 The danger of traveling through **Samaria**

 It could have taken up to a **week**

 *But Joseph acted with courage and care*

 *And the mystery of incarnation was allowed to unfold*

It unfolded, however, within a **homeless** family

 No shelter, no in, no tent, no home

 Sure, it was Palestine and not Chicago in midwinter

 But it was nonetheless dangerous

 With **marauders** about

 And **wild dogs and jackals** out on the land

 Terrifying enough for an expectant family

who eventually found shelter in a **barn**

 A **cave** for animals

 Who knows how much our **adolescent saint** slept

 Guarding the entrance to that cave

 While Mary gave birth to a child not his own

 *But Joseph acted bravely and selflessly,*

*and the mystery of incarnation was allowed to unfold*

While details are sketchy

 We know that **anxieties did not cease**

 With the birth of the child not his own

 Who could imagine that Joseph and his young family

 Would soon be **refugees from political assassination**

 Fleeing the wrath of Herod

 And going down into Egypt …

 **Immigrants** in a foreign land without **family or visa**

 **Job or livelihood**

 Outsiders … who didn’t speak the language

 And didn’t know the local customs

 *But Joseph acted bravely and expeditiously*

 *And the mystery of incarnation was allowed to unfold*

There are few other facts we have

about this **boy guardian** of the son of God

we know he was a **carpenter**, a blue-collar worker

 a day laborer

 who probably knew his **fair share of unemployment**

 we know that, when his foster son was 12

 he **misplaced the son of God**

 on a little trip to Jerusalem

 and in the **ensuing dialogue**

 after the boy was found

 was reminded by this young rabbi

 that **he was not the boy’s true father**

 and that Jesus needed to be

about his true father’s business

 as **humiliating or depressing**

as that exchange may have been

Joseph never objected

 never corrected his young ward

*Yes, Joseph acted gently, acted humbly*

*and so the mystery of incarnation was allowed to unfold*

The only other thing we know about this blue-collar saint

 Was that he **died in obscurity**

 While we can guess that it was in Nazareth

 We do not know the year or the date

 The setting or the cause

 **Tradition** tells us that he was surrounded by

 His virgin wife

 And his foster child

 The **first member of the holy family**

 To experience the new reign of God

 In all of its fullness.

While often marginalized

 **Reduced to the figure of a stooping old man**

 In the shadow of his youthful wife

 And divine foster son

 Or turned **into a sacred real estate agent**

 Only valuable if his image

 Is buried upside down in a back yard

 In hopes of selling a house

Joseph **was and is much more** to the Church

 Especially in this advent season

 A down to earth, flesh and blood image

 Of what it means to **allow incarnation to unfold**

 Amid the ordinarily and extraordinary trials of life

*A* ***17****-year-old*

 *Who takes to himself a wife*

***Pregnant*** *by another during their betrothal*

 *The young head of a family*

 *Caught in the* ***demands of occupation***

 *Who guides his pregnant wife on a difficult journey*

 *A* ***homeless foster-father*** *to be*

 *Who finds shelter under duress*

 *Escapes the threat of political assassination*

 *And becomes a stranger in a strange land*

 *A blue-collar worker*

 *Who endured the ups and downs of unemployment*

 *The ups and downs of raising a foster child*

 *The ups and downs of family life*

 *And died in obscurity … maybe as young as 30*

*But through it all*

 *He acted justly, gently, bravely, selflessly*

 *so that the mystery of incarnation might be allowed to unfold*

I have a great friend, colleague, and writing partner

 His name is **Herbert** Anderson

 A Lutheran Pastor, pastoral theologian, husband

 Father and grandfather

In 2002 Herbert authored a book entitled **Jacob’s Shadow**

On Christian perspectives on masculinity

 It is a **very personal book**

 In the prologue alone he talks about loss

 About the loss of his **leadership** role in his family

 About the loss of his **academic platform**

 About the loss of his **health**

As he readily admits, his **wife eclipsed him**

financially and professionally

 She is now the only woman president of a Lutheran

 Seminary in the United States

 And he is **retired** from full time teaching

 His bout with **cancer** made him rethink his mortality

 And the **ascendency of his children** and their children

 Sometimes marginalized him in his own family

Hebert, whose **first great writing was about death and loss**

 A classic penned with his great friend Kenneth Mitchell

 Entitled all our losses all our griefs

 Ends his book by suggesting that men

And maybe all of us

**need to practice dying**

by giving away our treasures

possessions and positions

 while we are still capable of handing them

 and explaining why they are treasures

 but always temporary treasures

As I know Herbert quite well, I think I can say with some surety

 That he would **never** consider himself a St. Joseph

 He’s much **too Scandinavian** for that

 Much too Lutheran

But in his own way, he teaches me

 What it means to be a **Joseph**

 To understand **advent as a daily exercise**

 And that is by revealing that sometimes

 The **practice of adventing**

 Sometimes the *practice and spirituality*

**of getting out of the way**

not **Robert Moore’s** images of king warrior magician lover

 but Herbert’s images of companion, gardener, friend and mystic

 who know how to allow others to flourish

 *and allow the mystery of incarnation to unfold*

And the **rabbi was asked by his students**

 Why is it that in ages past

 God appeared to Moses and Miriam

 To Abraham and Sarah

 To Judith, Esther and Ruth

 But to no one in this day

 Because, the rabbi responded,

 No one is able to bow **low** enough

In this **last week of adventing**

When the earth has turned once again from **darkness to light**

And we sit on mystery

With Joseph as our guide

We practice **dying, self-effacement, gentle bravery**

 **And getting out of the way**

So that others may flourish

 the **mystery of incarnation might again unfold**

 Through the carpenter’s son …

 Born eternally in the willingly baptized

 And the spirit of the foster father ... Joseph

 And the carpenter’s son ... who we call

 Christ the Lord.