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.