

4th Sunday in Advent

Cycle A-2025

Today I want to shower St. Joseph with some love and affection. As a member of the “holiest of families,” his unique role in God’s plan of salvation tends to get overlooked and ignored, except by the Italians. They love him and their St. Joseph altars. After all, how can he compete with Jesus and Mary? They cast such a big shadow of grace, holiness, and prominence, within the realm of faith.

The Scriptures reveal however, that in the eyes of God, St. Joseph was a “righteous man.” In biblical lingo, that is the ultimate compliment. Since God entrusted Jesus and Mary to the care of Joseph in life, God entrusted the care of the household of faith, the church, to him in death. He is honored as the patron saint or spiritual father of the universal Catholic church. As our spiritual father, we are invited to acknowledge his special place in the life of the church-past, present, and future. We are encouraged to seek his prayers for all the needs of the

church, especially holiness and fidelity in its members and fruitfulness in the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can turn to him for spiritual support during the trials and tribulations that the church experiences, whether self-inflicted or visited upon her by external realities. On a personal level, we can rely on St. Joseph to help us grow in our love for and openness to the church, especially if we need healing from being hurt or traumatized by her.

In light of today's Gospel, St. Joseph may have more relevance to our journey of life and faith than we previously imagined. During his papacy, one of Pope Francis's favorite comments was that we have a "God of surprises." St. Joseph experienced the "surprise of all surprises" when it was revealed to him in a dream that Mary was pregnant with a son, through the power of the Holy Spirit. On top of that, this child was going to be the "Savior of the World." The even bigger surprise was how prompt and obedient Joseph was to the revelation of the angel. Maybe the imagery and effect of the dream was so "soul stirring" there was no way he could doubt.

Or maybe it reveals something even more beautiful. Since St. Joseph was a “righteous man,” he was very familiar with God. God was not someone unknown to him or on the margins or periphery of his daily consciousness. God, and the will of God, was the center of his universe, and his whole life revolved around God the way the earth revolves around the sun. His life history of experiencing God’s faithful love, provided St. Joseph with the trust needed to make the radical leap of faith.

It is our own familiarity with God that will enable us to ultimately handle whatever surprises God throws our way. We can never really predict what God has up His sleeves, but we can have the confidence, borne of faith, that He will walk with and carry us as the Good Shepherd. The surprises of God can come in so many different forms: an unexpected vocation; a new direction in service and ministry; spiritual experiences that totally re-orient our hearts and our lives; a new relationship that feeds our hearts and souls; or overwhelming affirmation from others that calls forth previously unnoticed or unaccepted personal and spiritual gifts.

This helps us come to the further surprise that God and others believe in us, even when we don't believe in ourselves. This confidence helps us to make the leap of faith like St. Joseph, when we encounter the surprises of God.

Since God is only the source of love and goodness, the negative surprises that life throws our way, does not come from God, even though we like to blame Him for them. O' how we like to blame God for everything. It is so unfortunate. The negative experiences, however, provide us with the opportunity to be utterly surprised by His intimate love, care, mercy, and faithfulness, in the most difficult and painful moments of our lives, if only we have the spiritual eyes to see. We live into the surprise that God loves us with a personalized love and an attention to the details of our lives, in a manner that seems too good to be true.

The actions of St. Joseph in the Gospel also reveal his persistence in the face of the complexities of human relationships. His life probably would have been less dramatic, and complex, had he simply told Mary, "Mary, I love you but have a nice life. I wish you all the best." It

was his love, for both God and Mary, that led him to embrace and persevere with, the more adventurous and challenging path.

It is human nature for us to want our relationships to always be easy, fun, life-giving, and drama free. Since we are all wounded by sin and life itself, our relationships will not always be the garden of paradise. Intentionally or unintentionally, there will be times where there will be conflicts, problems, struggles, unmet expectations and needs, and selfishness and sin. People will fail us and let us down, and vice versa.

It is important that we monitor the expectations that we have for other people. Are the expectations we have of other people realistic, especially for a particular person or group of people? Without even realizing it, we can put others on a pedestal and expect them to always be without sin or selfishness. The country singer John Anderson warns us of the danger of pedestal making through the following lyrics from his song, "I Fell in the Water:" "I fell in the water that you walked on. Up to my heart in misery. I can't believe you're gone. I thought you could do no wrong. Til I fell in the water that you

walked on.” We would do well to set others and ourselves free from the illusion of endless perfection and harmony in our relationships. It is important to accept the reality that relationships always involve imperfect people and less than ideal circumstances. There will always be a need to forgive, to try harder, to try again, to start over, to let go, and to possibly move on. If we do not accept this reality, our relationships will become stagnant, wither, or eventually die. Relationships ultimately survive and thrive with a steady stream of love, grace, acceptance, mercy, and enduring commitment. There are always extreme circumstances that might lead us to legitimately distance ourselves from others or to terminate the relationship altogether. Outside of these extreme dynamics, let us not be too quick to discard another person or group of people because of the complexity and messiness that can be part of all relationships.

Inspired by the example of St. Joseph, may we grow in the virtue of stick-to-it-iveness. In doing so, we make flesh the enduring love of God for His people, as God did

through His Son Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of God and the Savior of the World.