RISKY ADVENTURES IN FAITH

As we started Mass today, we lit the fourth candle, reminding us to give praise - for what God has done, is doing, and will do. But what if the light of these candles isn’t enough to see the path which lies before us? What if, upon learning that Mary was with child, Joseph had not humbly accepted the path seen only by God?

To help us break open God’s word in our lives today, let’s take a journey to 734 BC and explore a king’s risky adventure in faith.

The great Assyrian Empire is systematically attacking and taking more lands under its control, especially south toward Judah. In face of this impending doom, a couple small states approach Ahaz, King of Judah, to unite with them and fight the advancing Assyrian army. Ahaz turns them down, and yes, they turn on him and attack Judah instead. Ahaz, great King of Judah, is in a crisis.

Along comes the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah pleads with Ahaz to “ask for a sign from the LORD, your God!” but what does Ahaz do? Nothing! “I will not ask…I will not tempt the LORD!”, he says. Ahaz sounds pious but listen carefully to what he says to the Assyrian king as recorded in the 2nd Book of Kings: “I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from [those]… who are attacking me” (16:7) Wow. This Ahaz character is a weak man hiding behind an image and the illusion of power, playing politics with the God of heaven and of earth, the God who repeatedly promises to never abandon him.

The prophet Isaiah isn’t deceived by the King’s ruse. I can just see Isaiah now… defiantly in the King’s face saying “Is it not enough for you to weary people, must you also weary my God?” Bamm! No longer is Yahweh “your God” he tells the King. Ahaz is left to his own demise… but not the people of Judah. God will not abandon them.

The sign that Ahaz won’t ask for is proclaimed through Isaiah: There will be a right and faithful heir to the throne, an heir to continue the Davidic line which your sinful actions have compromised. The birth of this son is the sign that God-is-with-you, always.

Fast forward now to Joseph and his risky adventure in faith. Matthew doesn’t waste any time in acknowledging the awful predicament that Joseph finds himself in, the scandal of his bride being found with child.

The upright Joseph is in a crisis. According to the honor code of the Mediterranean world and the Jewish law found in the Pentateuch’s Book of Numbers, Joseph is entitled to return Mary to her father… and expose her to death. He rationally decides to
quietly let Mary off, hoping that the rightful father will seize the moment, claim the child, and marry Mary before all “h-e double-toothpick” breaks loose.

Sounds like a reasonable plan, doesn’t it? Well along comes an angel of the Lord in a dream. “Do not be afraid” the angel tells Joseph. Oh really! Of what should he be afraid? Breaking the law and letting Mary go and live? Taking Mary and her unborn child into his home? Or believing the unbelievable announcement from God that a boy named Jesus has been conceived through the Holy Spirit?

Two God-stories of people finding themselves in crisis. Two very different risky adventures connected by the advent of “Emmanuel.”

I think most of us can agree that it seems like every situation - every adventure - we find ourselves in these days is a crisis. More and more choices surround us, ambush us, demanding our decisions and changes in our plans right here right now. Decisions which set about a sequence of events that radiate outward, ultimately affecting the youth of this parish. Decisions which set about a new pattern in their lives and in the lives of their kids’ generation. Every one of us has the responsibility to mold a life. We can never take that casually. Our faith has many a good Word about being a good parent, and a tradition that continues to be informed by God’s ever-changing landscape.

You see when it’s all said and done, that 4th Advent candle reminds us that a life of faith is mirrored in a life of praise. Praise is oh so much more than coming here, getting down on our knees, or reciting the Creed. Praise is our response to the ever overflowing love of God in our lives. Praise is taking all the faith we have and lifting it up to the Lord by the decisions we make, the sacrifices we offer, the risks we take, the responsibilities we accept to mold our lives, the lives of our children, and the children of this parish.

My brothers and sisters, let us walk confidently to this altar knowing that Emmanuel, God-is-with-us, is leading us by His Spirit to a world that glows brightly by the light of Christ. A path unknown yet a path of joyous Praise for those who do not fear.

I close now with these inspired and hot-off-the-press words of Advent joy from our papa Pope Francis: I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ… I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day… The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus… “I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace… let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!” (Evangelii Gaudium 3).