

4 Advent, Year "A": Isaiah 7:10-17; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matt: 1:18-25

Title: Called to be saints

You may have noticed that I will occasionally refer to this congregation as a community of saints. Sometimes I might refer to one of you individually as, 'saint.' I come by this tendency honestly. My teacher in this regard was the Apostle Paul. Listen again to how he opens his letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ... through whom we have received grace... to bring about obedience of faith... for the sake of his name, *including yourselves... who are called to be saints.*

'You yourselves who are called to be saints.'

You may notice from the printing of this text in your bulletins this morning that the word 'saints' here is not capitalized. We have come, over the centuries to reserve the capital "S" for those whose lives have been so extraordinary in their faith and in their Christian service that we have canonized them. We refer to them as if 'Saint' were their first name. And we create icons of them. And we put their image on stained glass windows. And thank God for the saints who set for us a holy example.

Bur, dear ones, we *too* are all called to be saints. Little 's' saints maybe, but saints nonetheless.

And if that is so, and it is, what could that possibly mean? Let us nibble around this concept of sainthood a little bit this morning. Who were, for example, this Joseph and this Mary before they would become known as Saint Joseph and Saint Mary? They were ordinary people, living in ordinary times, in an ordinary place, doing quite ordinary things.

Joseph was a man who earned his living in the trades. He was a carpenter by trade. He was a man born in a Jewish land and who, therefore, lived in a Jewish culture. And having learned a trade and thus now able to support himself, he had come to a time when he began to imagine finding a wife and starting a family of his own. And so, by and by, he had become aware of a young girl in town by the name of Mary. And he had become engaged to her.

Now, we need to understand that in that time, and in that place, and in that culture to become engaged meant something far more that it does in our day. To become engaged was more like the first phase of a marriage. It would have been almost unheard

of for a couple to announce that their engagement had been called off. To end an engagement would have carried with it much the same meaning as a divorce.

And so Joseph and Mary were betrothed. And things were progressing along quite nicely. No doubt the families had met. A dowry was being arranged. Wedding plans were being arranged.

In other words, normal things were happening in the lives of quite ordinary people in an ordinary little town in Judea.

But life would get a little messy. There was a little hitch in the giddy-up as I am want to say. But this was no little hitch. Mary was found to be with child. And the marriage had not yet taken place. Oh my. What to do?

I suppose Joseph could have hired a lawyer and maybe a private investigator and sued her for breach of contract. He certainly could have informed the elders of the church, and had Mary subjected to the authority and penalty of the church, which, by the way, would have been death by stoning.

But the Bible tells us that ‘being a righteous man,’ Joseph opted for none of these things. Rather, he decided to just call the whole thing off – quietly. Apparently, he still cared for his Mary and wished her no harm.

He would come to this place, that is to say this understanding, this resolve, by way of a dream. And in those days dreams were believed to be a means of special blessing. And they were absolutely known to be a means through which God would sometimes speak. In fact, I for one believe that dreams are still one of the ways God can and does ‘speak’ to us.

And God said something that Joseph would recognize that God had spoken to God’s people throughout history. He heard God say, “Be not afraid.” All throughout the Bible, when God wants to reassure, he will say, or he would inspire his prophet’s to say on His behalf, “Be not afraid.” And this is what God said to Joseph in a dream. God said to Joseph, “Be not afraid.” And so Joseph would hear God saying to him, in essence, ‘Joseph, everything will be all right.’

And we know, of course, that in that dream God goes on to say to Joseph, “The child that Mary bears is of me. He is special. And you are to name him Jesus, which is but a derivative of Joshua, which means, “God saves,” or “God With Us.”

And then Joseph was ‘all right.’ He was at peace again.

And it was so because he was a man of God. Not that he was yet a capital “S” saint. Just that he was a person who prayed his prayers, read and knew his scriptures, and who listened for God’s voice.

And we know from the Gospel of Luke that likewise Mary heard from God, she -- through the agency of an angel.

And both Joseph and Mary, through their faithfulness became a blessing. Their very lives became a means of blessing so significant that we now know both Joseph and Mary by the honored titles of St. Joseph and Saint Mary.

But what do the lives of such Saints have to do with us? Of course these particular saints are key players in what has been called the greatest story ever told. And they are key players in nothing less than the story of our salvation. And so we call them by their capital "S" names.

But dear ones, we too are called to be saints? In his letter to the congregation in Rome, the apostle Paul addressed those people, ordinary men and women, as saints. And by way of that letter, he calls us, members of this congregation saints as well.

And so I return to the question, "What does it mean to be a saint?"

It simply means that we too are called to a life of faithfulness. A life that resonates with the things of God. And a life that is responsive to God's call on our lives. A life wherein we listen for God's voice. A life that, in whatever way, becomes a blessing to others -- not necessarily because we set out to bless, but because it is through such a life that blessings quite naturally flow.

Sometimes faith can be seen as partnering with God to allow miracles to come out of our own messes. It's not that we look forward to moments or seasons of messiness in our lives. Yet, we do well to understand that our messes are sometimes the means through which we encounter things that are of and from God. Things that bless. Things that make meaning and sense of our lives. Messes can be, and sometimes are, that which precedes the best that God has in store for us.

My friends in Christ, we may never be known by the title big "S" saint. Yet, we are called to invite Jesus into our lives and to live lives in ways that allow Jesus to happen in us. Ways that allow blessing to come into our lives. And ways that, though we may never even know about it, bring blessing into the lives of others as well. For it is out of a life of faithfulness and a kind of responsiveness to the spirit of God and the heart of God that is from whence blessing flows.

Dear ones, it is when we live such lives that we are blessed. And it is when we live such lives that we are rightly called a community of saints.

Amen.