Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about” (Matt 1:18).

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Is 7:10-14; Ps 24; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:18-24

The dramatic story of Joseph's struggle to pass from legal righteousness to the mystery of love is part of a larger leap from the first covenant of Law to the second covenant of Grace.

In Luke, the other gospel besides Matthew that tells the story of Jesus' birth and childhood, this leap is illustrated first in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are righteous but sterile. They conceive by miraculous intervention, mirroring the conception granted at the start of the genealogy to Abraham and Sarah, also sterile by age. John the Baptist, leaps in the womb at his first encounter with the unborn Jesus. He will again make the leap from law to grace when he realizes from his prison cell that righteousness alone cannot explain the free gift of mercy proclaimed by Jesus, who calls John the greatest person ever born, but less than any disciple in the Kingdom of God.

Joseph's anguish is resolved only by a dream. An angel tells him not to be afraid to take Mary, his pregnant betrothed, to be his wife because the child she is carrying is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph must pass from the reassuring framework of legal obedience to the adventure of God's pure gift, a mystery he does not understand but embraces as his real vocation. He is to be the guardian of the greatest miracle since Creation itself. God is revealed in the world by Mary's child, Jesus, who fulfills Isaiah's word about Emmanuel, "God is with us."

We must all make the same leap from law to grace. How clear and simple religion would be if we could observe certain rules and be assured of God's favor. Instead, we are invited to struggle with the ambiguities of love and the challenges of mercy. Jesus revealed a God who offered unconditional and undeserved love to righteous and sinful alike. He pursued sinners, ate with them, invited them into the inner circle of his disciples as works in progress and friends who would fail him before they grasped just how much he loved them.

Our final week of Advent deepens the message of mercy: Enter the heart of God. The door is open and a place at the table is waiting for you. Love is an infinite and unlimited gift always there when we turn to God to receive it. The dream is true. Don't be afraid.