

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Tap, tap, tap. The small shaving of wood curled away from the aromatic cedar board.

Tap, tap. In a moments inattention the chisel bit deep into the grain, splitting the wood and spoiling the joint he was working on. He could make the joint work, but it wasn't going to be as tight as he would have liked. Not up to his normal standard of quality.

Well, nothing had been normal since his dream.



Tonight (today) I want to reflect a little bit more on Joseph.

As I said earlier in Advent, this is year A in our lectionary, the three year schedule of readings for Sunday mornings. It is the year when we will spend most of our time in the Gospel of Matthew. Even though there is a brief birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, every year at Christmas we hear the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke. And as you just heard, Joseph doesn't have a very big part in Luke, and as you may recall, his part isn't that much bigger in Matthew.

Truth to tell, Joseph has always been a bit of a background character in the church. Did you know that Joseph didn't even have his own feast day until 1479 and he wasn't even added to the official list of saints until 1729? This being the case, one might wonder what insights a reflection on Joseph might bring us this Christmas? We shall see.



As Joseph began the work of repairing the spoiled joint, taking small chips to limit the extent of the split without losing the whole tongue in the joint, Joseph wondered what to do about Mary. He never thought he could love someone as much as Mary. After so many years alone he had begun to wonder if he would ever fall in love. His dreams had always told him to wait and so he had waited.

A dreamer all his life, Joseph was always looking ahead at the possibilities of what was to come. Like a lot of other dreamers, he always seemed to be having trouble with

the here and now. In his dreams he was the master of a thriving woodworking business. As it was now, his work was barely feeding him. In his dreams he saw himself as the head of a large loving family. And now, before he was even married, his betrothed was having someone else's child. Some dream.



At it's most banal, the life of faith is sometimes described like the Christmas Santa Claus fable – you know, being nice during the year so as to stay off the naughty list so that we get gifts on Christmas; or to dress it up for church, being nice to each other in this world, so we get to go to heaven in the next.

Well I'm here to tell you that if you can't tell the difference between God and Santa Claus, you're in trouble...Big trouble. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that God doesn't care how you behave, it's just that God cares so much more.



He first met her when Mary had come to his shop with her father. All he saw of her was her eyes, but when you see the woman of your dreams, you know. Her father wanted a serving bowl for the dinner table. Joseph replied that he had nothing suitable at present, but that if he could return tomorrow, he was just finishing up a nice bowl with a pattern of grape vines and branches. The man said he would return tomorrow and left, with his daughter glancing back at the stunned carpenter.

Though it was months ago, Joseph could still remember that night, his heart urging him on as he worked all night long carving, transforming a plain bowl from his stock with the fine interlacing pattern of vines and branches. The next day Mary's father was overjoyed, and Joseph asked him for permission to court his daughter. Joseph was overjoyed in return when her father said yes.



Do you remember being in love that first time? The feeling of euphoria? All the goofy and sometimes extravagant things you did for your beloved? And sometimes, the fear that those feelings might not be returned? Do you remember your heart skipping a beat the first time your beloved responded to your love with a gaze, a touch, or a kiss?

At the core of our faith, the center out of which everything else flows, is the understanding that God loves us. We too often abstract it and tame it in church, but the truth is that God passionately loves us. Most often, we think of God loving us as a parent, protecting us and watching over our actions. But we must remember that God is our lover as well, and so we have been given that special power to make God's heart skip a beat whenever we return that love.



The tongue of the joint repaired as best he could, Joseph moved on to the next joint as he remembered the excitement of their courtship. Mary was young, much younger than he was, but she had a wise heart. As he shared his plans and dreams she always anchored them in reality. He knew right away that she was right for him, and day after day the conviction grew; grew that is, until the day she shared her own vision with him. She was having a baby and it wasn't his.

That was a day of torment, as his head wrestled with his heart. Jacob and the angel had nothing on his wrestling match. Even after the clarity and resolution of his own dream, his heart still limped. He would do what he must, but his heart wasn't in it. He would give the child his name, but how could he really love it. It wasn't his. With a mallet he tapped the final joint home.



Love is never as easy in real life as it is in the storybooks. It would be a lot nicer in the world if "and they all lived happily ever after," was as easy to do as it was to say... but it isn't.

I imagine there are not a few of us here tonight that are facing family gatherings during the holidays with various amounts of dread. There are so many expectations placed on Christmas to be perfect in spite of our humanity. We try so hard to correct mistakes made throughout the year with all the "things" of Christmas. We give more. We smile more. (Or we try to!) But often it rings hollow. We lie more as well. Like Joseph, our hearts limp.



Joseph set the crib on the floor of the shop. Not perfect, but it would do. He looked up as Mary entered the shop with the tiny baby in her arms. As their eyes met his heart skipped a beat and he chided himself for the doubts that lingered.

“Come here little one,” he said, “Come and see what I have made for you. Tomorrow you are to be named and it is fitting that you have your own bed.”

As Mary handed over the newborn, his arms reached up and out, and the tiny hands grasped Joseph’s beard. Looking down, Joseph’s heart skipped again as he saw Mary’s eyes shining out of the baby’s face. How had he missed that in the previous seven days? Perhaps his heart hadn’t been limping after all, he wondered. Perhaps it had been skipping all along, he just hadn’t realized it yet.



This Christmas remember that you are loved by God as you are, and cut yourself some slack. As hard as it can be to forgive others, it is almost always more difficult to forgive ourselves. We are not perfect. We do not love God with all our hearts and we do not love our neighbors as ourselves and God loves us anyway.

The great gift we have to share with the world at Christmas is that God came into the midst of this mess not to fix it, but to redeem it; to be present in the midst of it, even in the midst of the worst messes, and to bring light, and love.

Every Sunday at Eucharist we know that God is present in the bread and the wine and as good as that is, sometimes it isn’t enough. At Christmas we remember that God is with us all the time; that God’s love for us fills all that we do and all that we are, if we pay attention.

In the days ahead, as you make the rounds of family gatherings and parties, remember that you are not perfect and try to not demand perfection from those around you. In the name of God, lighten up! Look for the eyes of God twinkling in the faces of those you meet, and prepare to be surprised. Look close. God really is in there! Amen.