

HOMILY for 4th SUNDAY of ADVENT – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel & First Reading tell us how God might communicate to us through signs & dreams. Reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

A young man worked for a lumber company. He was a very good man, but he had one bad habit. Each night when he finished work he would put a piece of lumber into his truck. Soon he had a big pile of lumber. Finally, his conscience began to bother him. And being Catholic, he went to see his priest & confessed everything. Father listened very intently & then said, "Young man, you have done something very, very serious. You're going to have to make a novena. Do you know what a novena is?"

"No, Father," he said, "I sure don't. But, if you've got the plans, I've got the lumber."

Anyway, like the young man in the cute story who had no idea what a novena is, the people of God in the time of prophet Isaiah did not know which sign they should ask the Lord for. All they knew was to dream & pray for a world where every creature would get along & try to build a just & peaceful community. They sure needed a savior to show them & help them build up that new world. But, they hesitated & refused to ask for that savior. This Sunday's First Reading shares with us their bewildered state of mind via King Ahaz as following, "The Lord spoke to Ahaz: Ask for a sign from the Lord your God; let it be deep as the nether world, or high as the sky! But, Ahaz answered, 'I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!'" The reading continues, "...The Lord Himself will give you this sign: The virgin shall be with child & bear a son, & shall name him Immanuel." So, the Lord encouraged King Ahaz to ask for a sign to let him know that God still loved him & his people, especially after years of slavery & exile. Their faith in the Lord was definitely shaken after such a horrible experience. The people of God & King Ahaz probably wondered if God still favored them as His chosen people.

Like most people, King Ahaz did not dare to test the Lord or push his luck with the Lord & demand a miraculous sign to prove that their special relationship was still alive & well. The king wanted to show his humility & respect for the Lord who had been with the people of God throughout those years of ups & downs. His reluctance to ask for a sign could not stop the Lord from giving him & the people of God a heavenly sign, namely, "a virgin shall be with child & bear a son, & name him 'Immanuel.'" That name means "God is with us." That child would be the covenant between God & the people of God & would seal their special relationship. That child could be considered like the rainbow that God gave to Noah after the epic flood to reassure him & his family that such a massive destructive event would not happen again on earth. Or, that child could be viewed like the bronze serpent that the Lord commanded Moses to mount on a pole to bring healing to the people of God if anyone of them might be bitten by poisonous snakes in the desert.

As you can see, God has revealed Himself to the people of God throughout our human history & sent us all sorts of signs & messages every day. The problem is that we usually could not interpret those signs or understand those messages in our daily lives. We have let other worldly distractions make us ignore those signs & throw away God's important messages for us. Imagine if Moses had missed out on the sign of the burning bush, he would not be able to meet the Lord & have an intimate conversation with him. Or, if Moses had misinterpreted the message of the Lord on how to lead the people of God out of Egypt, he might have led them the

wrong way or departed at the wrong time and caused many innocent people to lose their lives at the hand of King Pharaoh & the Egyptian army. Or, think about St. Joseph in this Sunday's Gospel who was given a message in a dream from the Lord about his wife Mary's conception. Here is how the whole incident is described to us, "...When His [Jesus'] mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream & said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it was through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son, & you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.' ...When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him & took his wife into his home."

Many people often assume that God only talks to us when we're awake. But, this Sunday's Gospel reminds us that God communicates to us day & night, even when we're asleep. That is why we've learned that St. Joseph heard a message from an angel in a dream letting him know that Mary would be conceived by the Holy Spirit & bear a son to bring salvation to the people of God. St. Joseph awoke & carried out the divine plan by taking Mary into his home & later naming his adopted son "Jesus." If St. Joseph was able to get a message from the Lord in a dream & understand it, he surely would be able to do the same thing when he is awake. So, how would someone like St. Joseph be able to pick up the divine signs & interpret their messages night & day?

First of all, St. Joseph must have had a close relationship with God & understood the divine language. Like many holy figures in the Bible & our Christian tradition, St. Joseph must have spent lots of time in prayer. That is the only way he could communicate with God & the divine world & understand its messages. Second, like his wife Mary, St. Joseph was a man of virtues who humbly let God make good use of him as an instrument of God to accomplish greater things for the whole human family. Otherwise, he could have simply walked away from the divine plan of salvation & let God & Mary deal with it themselves. Finally, in Western culture, we do not hear a lot about St. Joseph. Instead, we have pushed him to the background & focused more on Mary. However, in the Vietnamese & Asian culture, St. Joseph is an important role model for men & fathers/grandfathers. His statue can be seen in all Catholic churches as he is greatly revered as a safe protector & fine example for all Catholic families. I hope all men & fathers/grandfathers would look up to St. Joseph as a wonderful role model in their lives.

My dear brothers & sisters, what sign should we ask the Lord for this Advent? I hope the sign that the Lord gives us this season will bring us & our world much joy & hope. That sign will come to us in the form of Baby Jesus who is born in a manger to show us God's love & bring us divine salvation. Hopefully, we would imitate St. Joseph to build up a good relationship with God through prayers & a life of virtues so that we will be able to pick up the divine signs for us every day & understand their messages. That way we would carry out God's will for us like St. Joseph did & help bring about lots of miracles like the birth of Jesus for our world.