

*a special eReflections series*

# Advent 2010

*Lectionary Readings*

December 19, 2010

## **Advent 4: Joseph and the Walk of Faith**

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7; 17-19; Romans 1:1-7;  
Matthew 1:18-25

**By Ruth Haley Barton**

*“Sooner or later, if we follow Christ we have to risk everything in order to gain everything. We have to gamble on the invisible and risk all that we see and taste and feel. But we know the risk is worth it, because there is nothing more insecure than this transient world.”*

Thomas Merton

This week’s Advent reading focuses on Joseph and the walk of faith that the Christmas story drew him into—one that required strength of character, obedience to a mystical encounter with an angel in a dream, the willingness to take risks based on what he heard in that dream, waking up and staying awake to the spiritual reality of what was unfolding in his life. Saying yes to faith required Joseph to make brave choices in response to the revelations of God’s will for his life and it put him on a completely different path than he had planned. It placed him squarely in the middle of the greatest story ever told.

**Character in the Midst of Confusion**

The greatest story ever told begins with a real moral dilemma: Mary was officially betrothed to Joseph and they had maintained a chaste relationship when she was found pregnant. This, of course, created a very personal dilemma for Joseph since he knew he was not the father of the baby. What's a man to do?

When we are under pressure, who we really are comes out and this was certainly true for Joseph. Joseph was a righteous man and righteousness is what came out when he was caught in the vice of public scandal and his own personal pain. His response to the situation came from deep inside his own character rather than being shaped by the pressure that was coming from outside forces. Even in the midst of what he perceived as a betrayal, his choices were driven by his great love and commitment to Mary's well-being and also by his own inner conviction about how he wanted to behave in the situation.

Subjecting Mary to public scandal was not in him. What was in him was kindness and sensitivity to Mary's situation and a desire to be good to her and to save her from additional humiliation. From his good heart, he decided to dismiss her quietly rather than claiming his right as an injured husband. If Joseph had made a different choice, no doubt Jesus would still have been born but it would have made for a very different story—one full of bitterness and human rancor. This choice alone—the choice to be good to Mary in the face of his own disappointment and personal pain—demonstrated an inner strength and a profound trustworthiness that confirmed he was the one to walk beside Mary as she opened herself so completely to God. This choice alone meant he was the one to be most intimate with the Christmas story as it unfolded. And his response of strong love eventually fashioned a home for the child that was born

and the woman who birthed him.

### **Waking Up to Spiritual Reality**

Grace was at work in Joseph's situation. In the midst of his grief, his inner turmoil and (probably) his sleepless nights, God sent an angel to tell him the truth about his situation, to calm his inner turmoil and to give him the wisdom to know what to do. In order to stay faithful to the walk of faith, Joseph had to wake up to spiritual reality rather than being mired in a more human perspective. He needed to have the willingness to change his approach to the situation based on his encounter with the angel and to see it in a whole new way based on the angel's revelation.

Joseph had had a plan—to put Mary away quietly—and it was a good plan. It came from a good place inside him. But it was still only a human plan that came from looking at the situation solely from a human perspective. The walk of faith required Joseph to wake up, to see his situation from *the vantage point of what God was doing* and to change his approach accordingly. This kind of relinquishment can be hard—the relinquishment of a plan that we have already mapped out in our heads. For Joseph, relinquishing his own plan was necessary if he was going to respond to the spiritual reality that was unfolding in the midst of this human drama. It required inner vision that enabled him to perceive far more than the human eye can see and comprehend. It called him to rise above his own pain and confusion to *belief* that “all this was taking place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”

### **The Obedience of Faith**

When we start to wake up and see more clearly what the walk of faith requires we are faced with a choice—*the choice to get up and do what the Lord has commanded us to do*

*and to subordinate every other thought and desire to the revealed will of God.* Paul calls this “the obedience of faith” in the epistle reading for the week. Knowing the will of God is not enough; *doing* it is what matters. Here our desire to avenge ourselves, to explain ourselves, to be understood, to maintain personal comfort and security, to have our lives make sense to others or be validated by them is subordinated to the deeper desire to say yes to God and join God in what he is doing. This kind of obedience might mean that, for a time at least, we are willing to look like a fool to everyone else because God’s wisdom is the foolishness of this world. (I Corinthians 1:25)

Many of us harbor a subtle belief (or at least a hope!) that we can say yes to the walk of faith and it won’t require much of us. That we can follow God’s will and never have to appear foolish. That we can take the risk of following God and still have our security. That we can be righteous and yet take subtle vengeance on those who have betrayed us. That we can be awake to spiritual reality and still accommodate ourselves to human thinking and planning. That we can fudge on faith just a little and it won’t matter. But there is nothing in Scripture that supports this! In fact, the Scriptures clearly indicate that he who finds his life purely on the level of human survival will eventually lose it and he who loses his life at this level will surely find it.

### **Faith Matters**

One of the most striking things about Joseph’s story is that he was not one of the main characters in the story—his was a supporting role in the truest sense of the word—and yet his choices mattered so much! We might think that our ability to walk in faith doesn’t matter all that much. We might think we can play it safe, let others take all the risks and it won’t affect anything. But Joseph’s story tells us that nothing could be

further from the truth!

Joseph's story tells us that our willingness to take the journey of faith affects everything. It tells us that the walk of faith will require something of us, perhaps more than we thought we were capable of. But it also tells us that as we say yes to the walk of faith, we too can find our place in the greatest story ever told—the story of God's purposes lived out in and through our simple existence. We, too, can experience God-with-us like we have never experienced him before. We, too, can recognize the coming of the Divine into our hearts and call his name Jesus.

Question: How is God inviting you to take courageous steps in your own journey of faith this Advent season?

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Print off the following Scriptures, move away from your desk and settle into a place that is conducive to quiet reading and reflection. If you wish, have your journal with you in case there are any personal reflections you wish to capture in writing. Remember, you are not reading for sermon preparation or any other ministry purpose. You are engaging Scripture now for the sole purpose of allowing God to speak directly to your soul through the process of *lectio divina*.

Begin by breathing deeply as a way of quieting yourself and opening to the Holy Spirit who is closer to you than your breath. Allow yourself to become aware of where God is inviting you to take another step in your own walk of faith. Keep breathing.

*Read all four passages slowly and reflectively, not primarily*

to gain information or analyze the texts but listening to get a general idea of the Biblical themes contained in the lectionary Scriptures for the fourth week of Advent. *Then choose one passage for reading, pondering and savoring today* using the process of *lectio divina*. You might want to move through the passages in order or you might want to start with the Gospel and then move to the others as the week progresses. *Once you have chosen the passage, read that passage four times (silently or aloud)* asking a slightly different question each time. Allow for a few moments of silence after each reading.

- In the first reading, listen for the word or the phrase that strikes you. In the silence that follows, just savor the word.
- In the second reading, listen for the way in which your life is touched by this word. What is it in my life that needed to hear this word today?
- In the third reading, listen for an invitation from God contained in this word. Is there something God is inviting me to be, or do in response to this word? What is my response back to God?
- Read the passage a fourth time and rest in the word you have received in total yieldedness and abandonment to the love and the will of God.
- Resolve to “live out” or incarnate the word you have received as God leads.

©Ruth Haley Barton, 2010. Ruth Haley Barton is founder of the Transforming Center. A trained spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, she is the author of numerous books and articles on the spiritual life.

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The lectionary schedule is taken from the Revised Common

Lectionary Cycle A; Scriptures are quote from the New Revised Standard Version.

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!  
3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.  
7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.  
19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

### **Romans 1:1-7**

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, 7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.