

4th Sunday in Advent
Year A

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

In our world today, we seem to always want perfection. On television and in the movies, we see the perfect Christmas setting, with snow, happy people, and lots of gifts under the perfectly decorated tree. Hallmark cards and advertisers continue the myth.

Each year, the altar guild polishes the brass and brings out the poinsettias to brighten the sanctuary. Preachers strive to create the perfect sermon, because they know there will be people at church for Christmas who may never show up the rest of the year. Perfection is the name of the game.

As a child, I remember going into the woods each year to select the perfect tree. There in its natural setting, the tree we found was perfect. However, when we got it home and brushed the snow off of it, we began to see the gaps between branches we hadn't noticed when we found it. We noticed that some of the branches were not as full of needles as we thought. But, it was our tree that we had selected and cut down. Perfection, Christmas, is a fleeting notion that seems to fade as we get closer to the big day.

Perhaps, this is fitting. In our gospel reading, I think it is safe to say that things did not go as Joseph had planned. The first Christmas, at least in Joseph's eyes, was far from perfect. While we are not told, it is probable that this marriage to Mary was arranged. Perhaps his father had talked with Mary's parents and come to an agreement about the dowry and other details. We don't know for sure, but that was a normal way of conducting business at that time.

I'm sure Joseph was pleased with the prospect of having Mary as his wife, until she broke the news to him that she was already pregnant. Engagement was as binding as the actual marriage and sexual relations were strictly forbidden. Besides, Joseph knew he had not gotten her pregnant, so this was a scandalous situation. How could he marry a girl who had already been unfaithful? The punishment for a woman caught in adultery, which was clearly the case here in Joseph's mind, was stoning. However, Joseph didn't want to go that far; he decided to quietly end the engagement and let Mary go off and have her child out of the spotlight.

We know the rest of the story. But, it was far from perfect. A pregnant wife, a forced trip to Bethlehem, no place to stay when they got there, and misery all around. This is not the way Joseph had planned for his marriage to begin. What went wrong?

God had a plan. In the early verses of the Gospel according to Matthew, we see a genealogy, tracing a lineage from King David down to Joseph. But, there is an interesting note when we get to Joseph. Instead of the usual X the father of Y, we find the statement, "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born." How could Jesus be the son of David

without this final link? Joseph was the key to God's plan, because being a natural son of one's father was not needed to be considered a son. According to the custom of the time, the fact that Joseph named him Jesus was the key step. It was a public admission that Joseph was claiming this child as his own. We see this throughout the list of Roman emperors. Thus, by Joseph accepting the role as father to Jesus, Jesus became part of the lineage of David.

In this same way, we become children of God when God accepts us as part of the family. I don't think any of us claim to be direct descendants of God, but we are children of God because God says we are. Joseph's fears were relieved by the words of the angel who, in quoting Isaiah, reminded Joseph of the prophecy regarding this child. We are relieved of our fears by the words of Jesus telling us we are children of God.

Will we find perfection in our Christmas trees? Will we find perfection in our Christmas dinner? Will we find perfection in our worship and in the decorations? Possibly. But, perfection is not needed. Jesus proved that love is greater than perfection. As we share our love of God to all we meet, that is the perfection God seeks. As the carol says, "Love came down at Christmas." Let our love bring God's perfection to the lives of those we meet this season.