

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2025

Most of us have at some point in life been in a situation where we are not sure what to do. Where there was no clear answer to a difficult situation. Maybe some sort of moral dilemma where even after praying, discerning, and reflecting, the path just doesn't seem clear. St. Joseph finds himself in such a situation in today's Gospel.

From Joseph's perspective, it may seem that there is a conflict between the love of God and the love of neighbor because his betrothed, Mary, is pregnant before they have begun to live together. And the Law says something about such situations. The Law would say that a woman in this situation could be even stoned; put to death. Certainly, if her situation became known, she could be publicly ridiculed and shamed. Joseph loves God; he loves the Law of God. He wants to follow the Law; he wants to honor the Law, but he also loves Mary very, very much. He is not willing to expose her to shame. He certainly doesn't want to see her put to death. So, what does he do?

I have a hard time imagining that Joseph actually suspected Mary of adultery. Presumably, Joseph had been able to spend at least a little bit of time with Mary. He would have known very quickly of the purity of her heart, her goodness, her holiness. How could he even imagine that she would commit adultery? I have a hard time accepting that theory or that interpretation of the passage. Other readings suggest that Joseph recognized that something divine must have taken place if Mary was now found with child and that he now had a sense of awe and wonder and unworthiness. He said he would try to divorce Mary quietly. In any case, Joseph reflected on his dilemma and ultimately decides to divorce Mary quietly. And undoubtedly Joseph

must have thought that this would be the best path, the most loving path forward.

One of my favorite commentators on this Gospel, Father Simeon, suggests that Joseph was so fatigued by his pondering of this dilemma, that he fell asleep. And it was in that sleep that the light shown, and he knew what to do. It was in this sleep that the angel of the Lord came to him and said, *“Do not be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary your wife into your home. The angel explains, “For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her womb.”* And the angel points to Joseph's involvement, right? Joseph is to be the one to give Jesus his name. So, Joseph, in the midst of this darkness, in the midst of this struggle, confusion, uncertainty, received the light of divine wisdom. And then proceeded immediately to take Mary into his home and to allow God's plan to unfold.

The same Father Simeon in his commentary on the verse about the appearance of the angel to Joseph writes: *“Persevere in darkness, without rebelling, and without lighting some trembling candle and God's healing light will invade you.”* That sentence lept off the page to me: *“Persevere in darkness without rebelling, and without the lightings of a trembling candle and God's healing light will invade.”* I think there's so many times in life facing decisions where the answer was not clear, I don't know if I rebelled all that much against God, but I have certainly lite my own candle. In other words, in the midst of this darkness, I'll say, “Well, Lord you do not seem to be giving me an answer, so I'll make one myself. I'll light your candle. If you are not going to do it, I will make the light. I will craft my own solution to this situation, this problem.” By God's grace, I don't know, sometimes it goes okay, but I don't recommend that course of action. *“Persevering in darkness without rebelling, and without lighting of a trembling candle and God's healing light will invade.”*

Wait patiently for the light of Christ. Wait patiently in silence. Listen. Resist the temptation to light that trembling candle; to rely on your own understanding, your own resources, your own strategy.

What constitutes that darkness in the common circumstances of your life? Just take a moment to ponder that question. Where is the darkness where the light does not shine? It will be different things for different people. For some there may be a real struggle with anger, there might be confusion about your path forward in life. It could be the reality of a serious illness or cancer, or it could be struggles with memory loss. It could be financial problems. It could be relationships that are strained and not being resolved. It could be unforgiveness, remembering past hurts over and over and over again. We all have different things that constitute that darkness. What do we do with that? That is the question.

The whole season of Advent invites us to sit in that darkness waiting for the Lord, begging the Lord to come. I keep saying it is always on the Church's lips during the season of Advent: "Come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. Not just to bring consolation and peace to my heart. Calm my darkness! Bring light into this darkness that is in my life."

As Advent nears its culmination, I think it is a good time for us to re-prepare ourselves with observers, really entering into silence. The quiet, the waiting. In the concrete reality of our darkness, whatever there is in our life. And above all to draw nearer and nearer to Jesus in the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Light. The Sacrament of God's truth. In the Eucharistic we encounter that God is with us. Instead of lighting that trembling candle, crafting our own solutions to this darkness, let us rather to draw near to Jesus, the light of the world, the Bread of Life, the one for whom our hearts long.