

Grace, mercy, & peace from God our Father & our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Sometimes life and the world leave you between a rock and a hard place, and the only options that seem to be available to you are bad and worse. Joseph finds himself in just such a place in this morning's gospel – finding himself with no good choices. Mary, his betrothed, has been found to be with child, not his child. Joseph is bar mitzvah, a son of the law, and in this situation the law is clear – the marriage union must be dissolved. Typically, this means going to the public court, and declaring her to be an adulteress, which at the very least destroys Mary and her family, and depending on the mood of the crowd could end in a stoning. Joseph doesn't desire either of those outcomes.

Another avenue available is to issue a certificate of divorce, which any man with a marriage contract can do at any time, simply because his wife no longer pleases him. Such certificates have been issued because a wife's cooking isn't good, or she burns the dinner; it was a man's world. In this case the man simply dismisses the woman, writes her a certificate of divorce, and she is free to marry another – in this case the father of the child. Although Mary contends that she's never been with any man; the growing evidence will soon put her denial to an end.

This seems the best choice under Joseph's difficult circumstances. Mary and her family aren't humiliated or worse, and the man, whoever that would be, can do the right thing for Mary and the child. This has been weighing on Joseph for days, and he hasn't slept well the whole time, but now that he's decided a course of action he finally falls into

a deep sleep.

It's not the peaceful, satisfying sleep Joseph hopes for, because an angel comes to him in a dream. If this has ever happened to you, you know it's frightening enough to nearly make you soil the bed. The dreams are strange enough, but along with them goes the certainty that the angel stands at the foot of your bed. Even though your eyes are closed, you know exactly what the angel looks like – about 90 inches tall translucent green, creepy like Lurch from the Adam's family, and silent as death – no wings by the way; those are the seraphim. So you clamp your eyes shut even tighter, hoping that the angel will just go away even if the Lord sent it with a message. This, by the way, is why angels always lead with, *“Do not be afraid.”*

In Joseph's case Gabriel suggests a third option. Marry the girl; she has not done anything to humiliate you, and she is the Lord's chosen instrument. Through her God is doing a new thing, making a new creation, opening a new way of abundant life for humanity.

Now Joseph could choose to ignore this message from God, but being a good Jewish boy who knows the law and the prophets, he's aware that ignoring the Lord's message – not believing God's reassuring word – does not end well. Look at King Ahaz in 2 Kings. He ignores the prophet Elijah's message, takes matters into his own hands, and brings about the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity of his people. No. When God sends a message – no matter how unbelievable it may seem – you do what you're told if you know what's good for you. Fortunately, in this case Joseph takes

the message to heart. He takes Mary as his wife, and will name the child Jesus – *Jeshua* – *Joshua* – one who saves his people.

There is a cost to taking what's behind door number three. ***Joseph's life will no longer be his own*** because his life is part of something greater than what he wants. He will follow the Lord's direction wherever it may lead him: Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth. But in the end, regardless of the sacrifice involved, being part of God's mission to redeem this broken world will be worth it.

A few moments ago Lucille Briehl Wikrent came through the waters of Holy Baptism. And a message was delivered to her that she is beloved of God, a child of the most High, part of the Body of Christ.

In her life Lucille will inevitably find herself in that uncomfortable place between a rock and a hard place where there seem to be only bad choices. She will of course have the option of making those decisions thinking that the choices are only and all about her, or she can listen to the message of God, and understand that her Lord has a different way in mind for her – a way that chooses mercy over selfishness, a way that serves her neighbor as well as herself, a way of forgiveness rather than judgment, a way that leaves the door open for God to work God's creative, redeeming, unimaginably life-giving work.

Lucille can live and act as though she's alone in the world, and choose out of fear and a need for control like King Ahaz, but she does not have to do so. She can also learn – if you will teach her, if we will teach her – to live trusting that she is held by a love greater than all the

world's danger, hatred, selfishness, greed, and evil intentions. She can learn to listen for and to the leading of the Holy Spirit that she receives this morning. She can learn to see her life as a zero sum game or as the gift and open possibility it is as a gift of the God who created her and everything else.

It's true, like Joseph and Ahaz, she will have the choice to ignore Jesus' messages freedom, peace, and new life, but you should teach her what Joseph knew – there is grave peril in ignoring God's council and taking matters into her own hands. And that there is a better way – even though she will have to give up the delusion of control – which allows God to open new avenues in life, continue to forge a new creation, and open a new way of abundant life for humanity.

Lucille can choose – like Joseph – to serve the child Mary brings into the world – a child who will serve not himself, but all humanity even at the cost of His own life freely given on a cross.

There is a cost to following this child – taking what's behind door number three. ***Lucille's life will no longer be her own*** because her life will be part of something greater than what she wants. When she follows the Lord's direction wherever it may lead her she will discover the way, the truth and the life that leads to abundant life. Following Jesus will not always be easy. Sometimes it will require great sacrifice, but she will never be alone, she will be part of the family of Christ that reaches across this broken world, and God will use her to extend mercy, forgiveness, kindness, and peace to the world. Putting this child at the center of her life will not be easy, but in the end, regardless of the sacrifice involved,

being part of God's mission to redeem this broken world will be worth it.

AMEN !!!