

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are closing in on the end of the first season of the church year. Indeed, less than 48 hours remain in the season of Advent. It has passed so quickly for most of us—can't we have a few more days, please? I'm not quite ready yet.

I'm not ready, but not for the reason you might think. My shopping and wrapping are actually finished. Thankfully, Debbie does most of the shopping throughout the year, so all I have to do is shop for my gifts for her and, on the rare occasion, those couple of gifts that Debbie forgot to buy. My job in Advent is to decorate and cook, two things I really enjoy doing.

No, I'm not ready because I have had enough time to actually prepare for Christmas. I've been so busy driving, writing, shopping, cooking, decorating, and yes, partying, that I haven't had time to do what I *really* like to do in Advent—pause for a lengthy time of prayer and reflection. I have lost out on some of the time I would normally use simply to sit and think and listen to what God has to say to me because I have been tending to others things in this season of preparation.

Even as I ponder my lack of preparation—and whom do I have to blame but myself—I am reminded of the lack of preparation another man had in the weeks leading up to the Incarnation. Joseph, guardian of our Lord and husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary, didn't have much time for reflection when he learned that Mary would be the Mother of God. What in the world would people think? Mary is pregnant and they aren't even married yet. According to the Law, she should be stoned to death and he would be required to pay a large sum to Mary's father for the dishonor he brought upon the family. We don't know for certain, but many experts believe Joseph was much older than Mary, so for him to lose his fiancée in such a way may have been even more traumatic for him. What was he to do?

Joseph gave serious consideration to a very quiet divorce—something which was his right under the Law, and it is that consideration which led to the visit by the angel of the Lord. Today, this probably wouldn't even have been a question—countless couples have children before they are married. In many cases, the couples

are, like Mary and Joseph, at least engaged, but that is far from the norm, or so it seems. But for Joseph, this wasn't an immediately viable option. After all, what was he to do when Mary became obviously pregnant? How long could they hide the child's existence? What, oh what shall he do? Divorce seemed to be the only, and easiest, answer.

Of course, God has other ideas, and sends to Joseph an angel to have a conversation with him. The angel came to Joseph to reassure him that Mary's pregnancy had nothing to do with infidelity to her vow to Joseph. Rather, it was the work of no less than God Almighty, who had chosen Mary, of all the women of the world, to be the birth mother of God Incarnate, Jesus.

Last Sunday, you heard me speak of the importance and significance of the Incarnation. There is no doubt that at a very personal level, the Incarnation had as great an impact on Joseph as any other human being, with the exception, of course, of Mary. Today we don't seem to have any problems with teenagers getting pregnant—young Jamie Lynn Spears, a sixteen-year-old children's TV actor, just announced she's three months pregnant, after all. Nor do we seem to have a problem with unmarried couples or single women having children. But at the time of Jesus, this was a very big problem, and not acceptable within the society. Certainly it happened, but it wasn't accepted. But in every case, except Mary and Joseph, at least there was participation on the part of two people.

But Joseph gets hit with a whopper. Not only is his fiancée pregnant, he had nothing to do with it. To overcome this challenge, and to ensure that Mary was not put in an untenable situation, God was in action, sending the angel to Joseph to help make things perfectly clear.

“Joseph, child of God, you are to be a lucky man. Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah? They are about to come true. Yes, Mary is pregnant, and that is because God has chosen her to bear His only Son. You will not leave Mary, but take her as your wife, just as you have planned. When the child is born, name him Jesus. And most of all, trust God.”

And Joseph did indeed trust God, and took Mary as his wife, and served as the guardian of Jesus—his father to the people who knew him at the time. He had just a little time to prepare himself for fatherhood. He had even less time to prepare himself for dealing with what appeared to be a child being conceived and born out of wedlock. Time was not a luxury that Joseph enjoyed, as far as getting prepared.

So, too, is our time for preparation limited as well. For Christmas, we have but four Sundays to prepare ourselves mentally, physically, and emotionally. There is no “snooze button” that we can press to buy ourselves a few more hours of time. More importantly, we only have a limited amount of time in our lives to prepare for the much longer time in which we will be at rest in the Lord, living among the church triumphant. For indeed, we do not know when our earthly journey will be finished.

This very day, we might be called to the presence of our Almighty Father in heaven, there to give account for our life. One thing we don't have to prepare for, however, is how to answer the question, “Why should you be allowed into heaven?” That has already been answered for us. For we are sinful beings, and are in bondage to sin, and we cannot free ourselves from that bondage. Truth is, we *shouldn't* be allowed into heaven because of what we have done or not done. However, because we believe and are baptized, God has a place for us in His Kingdom. We have that place because God chose to become incarnate and enter the world as a helpless infant, nurtured and loved by two parents who really weren't prepared to be parents at that time. Under the loving care of Joseph, Jesus, God's only Son, became a skilled carpenter, and then as a young man began his public ministry.

Yes, the ministry of Jesus would lead to his death on the Cross, but that is what he was prepared to do. The Son of God knew for what reason he had been sent into the world by the Father, and to accomplish that mission, Jesus had to die on the Cross so that our sins might be forgiven once and for all times, and then rise from the dead so that we, like Christ, might not be bound by death and the devil.

No, Joseph wasn't prepared for the role he was to play in human history, but then again, neither are we. Only Christ knew the reason for which he was sent into the world. As the children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ, we may not know everything that is to happen to us, nor are we prepared for all that we will experience. However, we do know that we are saved by God's grace and that we are called to lead others to know Christ as Lord and Savior. Be prepared to do that, and the rest is just details.
Amen.