

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

This morning's reading from Jeremiah, much like some of our readings from Isaiah in Advent, speaks of God's saving help, God's rescue of people who were losing hope, who felt scattered and abandoned, who were fearful that their lives would remain in a state of perpetual sorrow and mourning. Jeremiah speaks of God gathering the people and making them well and whole, of bringing them into times of peace.

Jeremiah seems sure of God's promise; but Jeremiah's a little vague on the process. How do God's people experience God's saving help, God's rescue and redemption? Jeremiah tells us of the outcome, but what kind of action leads to that outcome?

One of my favourite readings for the New Year comes from an essay by Eberhard Arnold; in that essay, Arnold reminds the reader that, "...the miracle of God comes not only from above; it also comes through us." Sometimes this thought is comforting; but sometimes it is challenging. In

our Gospel today, we find Joseph experiencing the challenging aspect of being a part of God's miraculous, saving help.

When we went into lockdown last March as the first wave of the Covid pandemic hit us, that first week included the Feast of St. Joseph. I found myself contemplating the unexpected and the unknown, and thinking about Joseph and his experience of God's incarnation. Joseph had probably planned a good, normal life. He would wed a young woman of good reputation from a local family; they would raise children in obedience to the law of Moses, and be solid members of their community, allowing the Jewish faith and tradition to endure regardless of the social and political circumstances that surrounded them. And then an angel of the Lord appeared.

Joseph may have been content to lead his good life, and not have to directly confront the realities of living in land occupied by the Roman Empire. He could ignore the politics, he could avoid the upheavals that arose from time to time, as various Judeans raised rebellions against the Roman state. He would care for his family, fulfill the requirements of the Torah, and live peaceably as best he could. But the angel of the Lord

appears and Joseph finds himself deeply involved in the renewal of what it means to be a faithful follower of God, a new understanding of what it means to live in the certainty of God's promise to gather all people to wholeness, to wellness, to peace.

First, the angel of the Lord tells Joseph not to dismiss the young girl to whom he is pledged to marry, despite the fact that she is pregnant; so much for sticking to accepted social norms. But Joseph listens, believes, and does what the angel has said. He had probably hoped that this was the extent of his role in the process of God's salvation; but after the child is born, an angel of the Lord appears and tells Joseph to get up, and flee the home he has known and go to Egypt, because the child (who is not his), the child's life is in danger. So Joseph leaves behind whatever support of community, family, and familiarity he might have had, and flees to Egypt to escape the brutal intentions of Herod. So much for ignoring politics.

Joseph and his young wife and child must make their way in a strange land, far from anything that either of them would call home. Perhaps living a decent quiet life in those circumstances would be enough to fulfill the words of the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my Son." But no; an angel of the Lord appears, and Joseph finds himself on the move again,

reading the political situation, finding a way to some sense of safety for his young family. But by this time, I have to think that Joseph understands that there is no safety; there are only varying levels of risk; and that Joseph and this young child born to Mary must continue to risk all that they are and all that they possess in order to play their part in God's miracle of salvation.

The miracle of God comes not only from above, it also comes through us. As much as we in the western world like to think of ourselves as entirely independent individuals, that is a falsehood; we are interdependent, we are all part of one another, and the way we choose to follow - whether the way of love or the way of self-interest - will affect the outcome of our own lives, the lives of those around us, and the achievement of God's miracle of salvation. Joseph spent a lot of his time, and seemingly lost a lot of sleep, listening to the messages God gave to guide Joseph in playing his part in the miracle of salvation. Joseph realised that God's voice could not be held separate from his daily, mundane life; nor could God's voice be disconnected from the political and social dynamic around him. For if God's promise that our mourning will be turned into joy, that we will be enfolded in God's comfort, and given gladness instead of sorrow, then we, like Joseph, must learn that there is no safety if we and our world remain outside of

God's reign. Where any other king but Christ is sovereign over us -- whether that king is Herod, or Archelaus, or wealth, or the desire for power -- we will always be called to listen and act in order to bring about God's deliverance of humankind.

We have just passed a year in which much of the injustice and inequity of our social and political world have been laid bare. Our relationship with God demands that we not retreat from the challenge of living into the promises God spoke to Jeremiah. Like Joseph and Jesus, we must continue to risk all that we are and all that we possess in order to play our part in God's miracle of salvation. Amen.