

December 18, 2016
4th Sunday of Advent

“Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife”

*It is absolutely clear that Christians are always called
to serve Jesus by sheltering those most in need*

Background

Given the nosey nature of Mediterranean village life, the separation of men from women, and the fact that the betrothed couple were not yet living together, Joseph may have been among the last to learn of Mary’s pregnancy. Women would have noticed that she was not participating in their obligatory monthly ritual purification.

Joseph was in a predicament. The honor code of the Mediterranean world demanded that no one take properly that belongs to another. Mary’s child is not Joseph’s, so he hesitates to take it. If he doesn’t act quickly, he will be shamed.

By law, Joseph is entitled to return Mary to her father and expose her to death. But Joseph is an honorable man and determines to divorce her leniently. His sense of honor hopes that the rightful father will seize this opportunity to claim the child and marry Mary.

“Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife”

It is not difficult to imagine how Joseph felt during this whole scene. Mary could have been stoned to death for being perceived as an unwed mother, and his whole honor was in danger of being lost if he didn’t act soon. He must have felt like his world was being turned upside down, and yet he faced this unexpected development with faith, and he took Mary into his house

Sometimes it feels like our world is being turned upside down. I remember an experience I had with horses once when living on a farm. We pastured horses, one of them being a colt, for a neighbor. When it was time for him to pick up his horses, all went quietly into the trailer, but the colt would not go. No matter what the man did, that colt would not go out that gate. Finally, he just picked up the colt and carried it out. It was like watching a rodeo. The only world that colt knew was in that pasture, and it was not about to leave it. The metaphor is clear - it is difficult for us to leave the spiritually familiar; we just don’t want to go. But when we do face new horizons with faith, we will take Mary into our house.

With the recent election, our country is afraid

I read an article this week in the magazine, *Sojourners* titled: “*What can we do right now?*” It was written by founder and editor, Jim Wallis. Listen to how he is facing the unfamiliar with faith, how he is taking Mary into his house.

He talks about how many people and their children have been verbally and physically attacked since the presidential election - those of differing racial, religious and gender minorities - those who sit at the intersections of marginalized groups. He describes one way in which we can face these difficult times in faith - a movement called, “*The Matthew 25 Pledge.*” It reads: “*I pledge to protect and defend vulnerable people in the name of Jesus.*” It is based on based Matthew 25 in which Jesus says:

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”

What this article is addressing is how “our politics going on now are beyond our control — but we can control what we do with our own faith and with our own actions. No matter how Christians might have voted, it is absolutely clear that Christians are always called to serve Jesus by sheltering those most in need. This could be a unifying commitment between people of faith on both sides of the aisle — to protect the most vulnerable together.”

Addressing Three Areas of Concern

The Matthew 25 Pledge highlights three areas of concern. The first is “Undocumented Immigrants.” Arresting and deporting hard-working and law-abiding people who have lived in America for decades would break up families and potentially put people's lives in danger. The most at risk are young “Dreamers,” who were brought here as children and who turned in their names and contact information to the administration in response to executive orders that allowed them to work. Faith communities have the capacity to impose a clear domestic cost on any efforts aimed at massive deportation of those who have become our neighbors and fellow churchgoers.

The second is how African Americans and other people of color threatened by racial policing. There is a special concern about how their young people will be treated after the presidential inauguration. If there is excessive force against our citizens of color, and especially young people, local clergy and police departments must be held accountable.

The third area of concern is Defending the Lives and Religious Liberty of Muslims who are threatened with banning, monitoring, and even registration. U.S. citizens and immigrants who practice their Islamic faith in this country — our friends and neighbors — are our brothers and sisters as fellow human beings and children of God. Now more than ever, as we're watching the horror unfold in Aleppo, our Christian faith should *compel* us to act — to advocate for welcoming refugees of all faiths into our country instead of turning them away. The violation of the religious freedom of our Muslim brothers and sisters cannot be accepted by people of faith.

“I pledge to protect and defend vulnerable people in the name of Jesus”

This is not a political stance. Larry, Martha, Jeff, Nancy, Jake, Elizabeth, Henry - we can't hide behind a safe and comfortable faith - like a colt. Our faith sends us out to those who need help. It is absolutely clear that Christians are always called to serve Jesus by sheltering those most in need. Joseph was not afraid to take Mary into his house. Neither should we!

How can I not join others in taking this pledge?

How can any of us not join others in taking this pledge?