



**4th Sunday in Advent
12/19/10**

Second Thoughts, Second Chances, Fulfilled Promises

Let your face shine upon us, O Lord, that we shall be saved. (Psalm 80:7)

How many of you have ever had second thoughts? About anything. I know I have -- many a time. Some of these have been later regretted while others have been accepted with thanks.

Second thoughts can get us into trouble. Or, they can prevent us from getting into trouble. Second thoughts can often be difficult to think about. Our mind is all made up to do something, and then we start to think. *Maybe*. . . maybe this isn't such a good idea after all. Maybe I should not say what really is on my mind. Maybe I do not need to purchase that last minute out of budget Christmas gift after all.

Our Gospel today is yet one more example of second thoughts throughout the Bible. Eve debated whether or not to eat the fruit that was offered. Noah built the ark in the midst of great ridicule from his neighbor's, perhaps himself wondering what he was doing. Abraham willingly offered Isaac as a sacrifice outwardly, but inwardly was probably filled with much guilt and grief to give up his only son. Moses might have thought long and hard about going before Pharaoh with a request to let the Israelites go. Samuel second guessed the people's request for a king. Jonah said he would go to Nineveh, only to head in a different direction. When Queen Jezebel was after Elijah, he began to wonder whether or not doing what the Holy One wanted him to do was worth the risk of losing his life.

It should come as no surprise then Joseph had serious second thoughts. About being engaged to someone younger than he. What would the neighbors say, let alone his family? To be engaged to someone he did not know, who was pregnant, but not with his child. . .the societal shock was unimaginable. About being a parent. Joseph was a carpenter by trade. What did he know about being a parent? What would he do if the child awoke in the middle of the night? Parenting was a brand new adventure for him. About doing what Yahweh, the Holy One wanted Joseph to do. Who would ever believe him if he tried to explain. Yes, Joseph trusted, believed, and had faith in the Holy One, but even this request seemed to be a bit strange, if not daunting.

With all of these worries and concerns, one can only wonder if Joseph had many a sleepless night worrying about what to do. The dialogue in his mind may have gone something like this:

"What will my family and friends think of me? I can't do this! I just can't. . .I don't know a thing about being a parent. . .let alone caring for a child. . . It's against our law to have relations with a woman I am not married to. . .WAIT!! I know. . .I'll tell Mary she's a really nice girl, but that I just want to be friends. . . No! That's not right! How would I react if someone told me that?.. I know what I will do. . . I will leave the country for a very long time. . . Then, when I come back, hopefully people will have forgotten this incident, and life will be fine. . .No, because what if

something happens to Mary? What if she were publicly stoned for being pregnant and not having a husband? That's something I don't think I could have on my conscience for years. . . Okay, I know what I should do, but I really don't want to do. . . Oh, what should I do? What should I do???????

In the middle of second guessing not only the Holy One, but also himself, Joseph dreams. The dream is an angel assuring him not to worry. Rather to take heart, relax, to not be afraid, but to do as the Holy One has asked him to do.

I find something oddly comforting in this often overlooked account of Joseph's involvement in the Christmas story. In the middle of Joseph's second thoughts and misgivings, the angel comes to him and says, "do not be afraid." How often we need to hear those words even today!

Yet the other thing that strikes me as oddly comforting is the response of both Joseph and the Holy One. Even after the dream, Joseph does not remain uncertain about what to do. Joseph does as has been asked of him as though he never had those moments of doubt and uncertainty.

And the Holy One -- Yahweh, Jehovah, Everlasting Father, Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace does not consider Joseph's lack of enthusiasm or response to the request as negative. Nowhere do we hear the Holy One saying "so much for this one when I thought Joseph would work too! Guess it's time to find someone else interested in doing my will on earth". Rather, what we hear of the actions of the Holy One is rather to send an angel to Joseph -- not to convince, but rather to encourage and uplift in the work that is ahead of Joseph.

In that, the Holy One grants to Joseph a second chance. Now, if the Holy One can do that for the earthly father of his Son, even more so will we be granted second, third, fourth, even thousandth chances!

Daily we have second thoughts about doing God's will. We might question how our gifts can be used. We might wonder how we can be of help in a particular situation. We might even wonder about the people in our lives of how we can help them, or why they need our help. We might decide whatever it is God wants us to do is something we either do not have an interest in, or something we think we might not be able to do.

Yet in the midst of our second thoughts, second chances are granted. Even as the Holy One gave Joseph encouragement and a second chance, so also are we granted second chances. Second chances to try again. Second chances to do what God wants us to do.

Almost twenty years ago, a movie came out called "City Slickers". It was a movie about three men who went on vacation in the western part of the United States. Billy Crystal's character was in the midst of a mid-life crisis, trying to discern what his life was all about. At one point in the movie, one of his friend's tells him, 'life is a lot like a chalkboard. You make mistakes, but then you move on. It's called a do-over.'

A do-over. A second chance. Another chance to do what is right. That's the beauty of God's grace within our lives. For God's grace sustains us, grants us courage, and helps us in doing all that God asks, requires, and demands of us.

But there is another beauty in this second chance, another beauty in this gift of grace that we daily walk in throughout life. The beauty of this is that God's will -- on earth as it is in heaven -- is done -- not because of us. Rather, God's will is done in spite of us, in spite of our actions, in spite of our responses.

We can try to run from God. We can even try to tell God 'thanks but no thanks'. We can pretend that we did not hear what God asks of us. Ultimately though, we cannot hide from God. For it is God who changes our minds to match God's will.

Second thoughts, second chances. Within those second chances is also a matter of fulfilled promises. Matthew more times than any other Gospel writer uses the word 'fulfilled'. It was a reminder to his audience -- and to us -- of the hope and assurance we have that God's promises never fail. That God's word is true. That God's plan of salvation was fulfilled according to all that had been spoken by the prophets, that a child would indeed come to save the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen!!