

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Juan R. Mejías Ortiz, President, Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico; Ordained Minister, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*

**Sermon**

SEPR-PCUSA

What a challenging night. At the same time as love so intense. The biblical text places us in a scenario where the crossroads predominates. What will be the right path? What decision should be made? The story of the birth of Jesus told by Matthew takes us to one of the longest nights that Joseph of Nazareth, Jesus’ earthly father, had to live. Possibly the stories of Jesus’ birth circulated independently of other accounts of his life. Later, both Luke and Matthew incorporate them by presenting us with two dissimilar events in terms of facts, characters and chronology, but both point their theological compass in only one direction. Both emphasize that God responds with kindness to the cry of anguish of God’s people and does so by giving us the tenderness of love represented in the child-promise to be born.

While Luke lets us see the birth of Jesus through the lens of Mary, Matthew does the same but this time from the eyes of Joseph of Nazareth. In the liturgical reading, the evangelist does not give away the information that while Joseph and Mary are engaged to marry, Joseph finds the news of the miraculous pregnancy. Unlike Luke, none of the details of the annunciation to Mary are presented here. The focus is on Joseph’s reaction. What disconcerting news, the woman Joseph loves, his fiancée, is pregnant. How many ideas and reasonings will have dominated his thinking. It is easy for us to think about this event and even judge Joseph’s actions. It is easy for us because from the genealogy the narrator has taken us by the hand to communicate the joy that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One promised by God. But in the narrative succession, Joseph does not know it.

Without a doubt, Joseph faces a great crossroads. Treason, infidelity and adultery are punishable by the Deuteronomic code with death. Adultery is considered a dishonor that affects the entire community. For all the men and women who commit adultery must pay for this dishonor by stoning; that is, to die by stone. Joseph achieves something incredible. He makes love overcome pain and confusion. That is why Joseph decides to flee in order to assume responsibility and save the life of the young Mary. It is then that the miracle happens. In the night dominated by confusion and sadness, God’s grace intervenes to illuminate their path. Joseph of Nazareth, who evokes another Joseph, the dreamer of Genesis, receives the word of God. The angel of the Lord tells Joseph about God’s intervention: “Do not be afraid to receive Mary your wife, for what is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit.”

Precisely this season of Advent reminds us of the joy of God’s presence and closeness. Today you may be experiencing pain, anguish; even some fall into the grip of the so-called “blue Christmas” or “Christmas depression.” This is a condition that causes a deep feeling of melancholy to invade a person’s mind and heart. In fact, there are those who don’t even feel like decorating their homes or celebrating the Advent festivities. Like Joseph of Nazareth, we face crises and great challenges that sometimes disturb our tranquility and stop us on the way. If so, for you there is also good news. “God is here.” God is by your side. God will walk with you. Grief and depression no longer reign forever; much less hopelessness. Today God makes hope blossom in you again. A fresh air of spiritual, physical and mental renewal blows upon you that produces joy. God loves you in a special way. You will see that the way of darkness will be illuminated by the glory of God. Then you will behold God’s salvation.

The angel of the Lord communicated something glorious to Joseph. The unborn child will bear “the name Jesus, for he will save his people.” Dear brother and sister, God hears the cry of the people and responds with the joy of salvation. This is a time of salvation for you. If you have reviewed the liturgical calendar, there is another reading that accompanies us. Psalm 80 is one of supplication that prays for prompt divine intervention. On several occasions, the psalmist exclaims, “O God of hosts, restore us; make your face shine, and we will be saved.” On the one hand, this expression is a prayer of anguish that begs for the prompt intervention and saving presence of God. But, on the other, it reveals a conviction of faith and deep trust of the one who prays, who knows that God will hear the cry of the people.

Then both the psalmist and Joseph of Nazareth receive news that gladdens the heart. God responds to the cry of the people. Praise be to the merciful God Father and Mother of Jesus who surprises us with such grace. With the child Savior we celebrate and worship, something that will be essential in chapter 2 of Matthew with the wise men of the East, we glorify the God who cares for us. We bless the God who loves the sheepfold. This is a God who has decided to stand on the side of those who suffer, of those who are marginalized, of those who suffer “hunger and thirst for justice.” Without a doubt, this is the God who assumes the defense and care of the victims.

The evangelist with great sagacity tells the reader that this response of God for the victims is none other than that announced by the prophet Isaiah. In the first part of Isaiah, chapter 7, the prophet announces, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel.” The narrator continues with the translation of the name meaning “God with us.” Something extraordinary happens, not only for Joseph, but for you and me. The long, dark night, dominated by uncertainty, is dispelled by God’s presence. I insist again, dear brother and sister, “God is here.” Emmanuel reveals to us the God of love. Jesus simply manifests to us God’s tenderness and grace. That joy must penetrate the depths of our hearts so that it may experience God’s healing love. Today I invite you, in the midst of your struggles and challenges, to let yourself be sheltered by the tenderness of Emmanuel, God with us. The night of Joseph of Nazareth may have begun with sorrow but ended in joy, so I hope yours will conclude that way. And I pray for it.

So much so is God’s response that Jesus’ last words in this Gospel are a reaffirmation of the tangible presence for all who suffer. “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Amen.” Thus, our lives are blessed and illuminated with the glorious presence of Emmanuel.

Let us pray for those who are living through difficult times. Let us pray that the love of Jesus, the Savior, the divine Emmanuel will accompany you and fill your lives with peace. Let us also pray for retired pastors. May the Lord fill your lives with beautiful joys and good health. Let us also pray for the development of pastoral care by praying to the Lord Almighty that God’s hand will guide the ministries that are beginning on this journey. Let us pray.