

From my earliest years, I loved singing along with songs I heard on the radio. Often times when I'd belt out a lyric, I'd get an odd look from those around me. When I'd ask what was wrong, they would respond, "Those aren't the right words." Sure enough, when I looked up the lyrics to the song, I realized I had totally mangled them. (I'm thinking specifically of the lyrics to Elton John's "Benny and the Jets" and "Rocket Man.")

When we hear a portion of the first reading today from the Prophet Isaiah, something similar might be happening. We hear King Ahaz say, "I will not ask for a sign. I will not tempt the Lord." For a long time, I always thought that Ahaz was uttering words of humility in that verse; I understood that he wasn't going to test the Lord. But the background and context of the reading tells a different story. Ahaz was the ruler of those who lived in Judah (the southern part of Israel, as we know it today). Judah was under constant threat from neighboring nations. Ahaz was considering making alliances with the neighboring kings and nations in order to preserve his power and ensure his wealth. But along comes Isaiah who, inspired by God, prophesied that Ahaz should do no such thing. Such alliances will lead to the fall of Judah. Ahaz ignores Isaiah's preaching and joins forces with those neighboring kings and nations. Those alliances lead to the demise of Israel and result in the people being exiled from their native land. In today's passage, Isaiah uses the image of a virgin giving birth to a child in order to sway Ahaz from what he planned to do. That language is symbolic. With that phrase, Isaiah was trying to convey that new life would come to the people and the land of Judah if they just followed God's will. In

the end, Ahaz rejects that advice to his own detriment, leading to the eventual downfall of all of Israel.

Today, we interpret that prophecy uttered by Isaiah to be fulfilled in Christ. Christ is Emmanuel, literally “God with us.” And as we know from the Annunciation story, Mary conceived the Christ by virtue of the Holy Spirit. The “virgin (indeed) is with child.”

In the gospel just proclaimed, we hear a message that stands in contrast with the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah. As the gospel unfolds, Joseph is faced with Mary being pregnant before she and Joseph lived together. Joseph initially seems intent on quietly divorcing Mary. He wants no part of this seemingly scandalous scenario. While wrestling with that reality, an angel comes to Joseph one evening in a dream. The angel tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. God is with him, Mary, and the yet-to-be born Messiah. Unlike Ahaz who rejected the words of the Prophet Isaiah, Joseph accepts the words of the angel and he acts on those words taking Mary into his home. Again, unlike Ahaz, the people of Israel and all those who are faithful to God’s will are saved because of Joseph’s deep trust and fidelity to God.

The older I get, the more I seem to sound like a grumpy old man. When people are rude or don’t acknowledge a kind gesture, I mutter something like, “civility seems to be gone and respect isn’t valued in today’s society.” I moan that the quality of workmanship doesn’t seem to be at the level of what I experienced decades ago. I am outraged when I buy something and the cost of that item is now 30% more expensive than it was a year ago.

But more than the loss of civility or the loss of quality workmanship or the high cost of living, I think what I mourn most is how people no longer trust one another. We don't trust politicians because we catch members of both parties lying. They seem to serve themselves more than their constituents. We don't trust news or media outlets anymore because they seem to advocate for a certain position rather than pursuing the truth. And our trust in the Catholic Church has been shaken because of the mishandling of abuse cases for so much of our recent history.

Both the first reading and the story of St. Joseph and his encounter with the angel challenge us to revisit and reinvest in trust. While politicians, the news media, and even leaders of the Catholic Church might shake the foundation of our ability to trust, we are asked to trust what is most important – namely, our God. God will always be faithful. God will never seek to serve self. God will always be concerned with what is true. God will never cover up what is sinful and unholy.

St. Joseph's wholehearted trust in God is what helped to bring about the birth of the Messiah. His wholehearted trust in God the Father kept the Holy Family safe from scandal and from the threats of violence waged by King Herod. His wholehearted trust in God is what enabled he and Mary to raise the Son of God as their own. His wholehearted trust is what helped to lead Jesus to ministry and eventually what led Christ to offer his life for us on the cross and be raised up on the third day.

If you've been listening to the daily Advent stories posted on the FaithND site, you would have recently heard a narrative of a

student named Herjok Panther Deng Agot. Herjok was born and raised in South Sudan. Currently there are people who would say that South Sudan is a horrible nation. Its recent history has been marred by civil war and violence. The citizens of that country would be labeled by some as bad, terrible, or a description that is even more vulgar. Herjok and his family fled South Sudan and found refuge in a camp in neighboring Uganda. Despite the ongoing humanitarian crisis there, the US is no longer accepting Sudanese refugees. Herjok shared that he came to Notre Dame in order to participate in a program which develops “peacemakers and transformational leaders”. His dream was to use his knowledge, skills, and faith to make a difference for those faced with dire poverty and the threat of extermination due to civil war in Uganda and South Sudan. He returned to the refugee camp in Uganda where his family lives and is now doing just that.

Herjok was not visited by an angel. However, he listened to the voice of God which revealed itself in his mind and settled upon his heart. Trusting in God’s providence he risked everything to bring peace, joy, and the hope of what is possible with God’s help to the people of his country.

In these last days of Advent, we hear how God promises to settle upon our hearts so that we might dream dreams of what is possible because of his grace. During these days and as we approach the holy Season of Christmas, God commissions us to live out the faith and serve others as the Holy Family did. He invites us to trust him – even though the odds may be stacked against us and in spite of the fear which sometimes shakes the foundation upon which we stand. He commissions us to be

ambassadors of hope, instruments of peace, and architects of everything that is good and possible. His invitation and his commissioning stand ready to be accepted by you and me. Will you be an ambassador of hope, an instrument of peace, and an architect of everything that is good and possible for others? With God's grace, anything and everything is possible!

St. Joseph, inspire us. St. Joseph, increase our trust in your Son, Jesus Christ. St. Joseph, fill our hearts with the hope of what is possible through our Lord and Savior, despite our fear and the daunting tasks that seem to lie ahead of us. St. Joseph, pray for us.

Amen? Amen!