

I read a story about a school Christmas program recently. The boy who was supposed to play Joseph unexpectedly got sick and didn't show up. The teachers talked it over and decided to not replace him. The sad thing is, nobody even noticed. Nobody missed Joseph. Unfortunately, the same can happen with us.

We spend a lot of our time leading up to Christmas focusing on last-minute shopping, going to parties, or preparing to be with our families for the holidays. When we actually have time to slow down and reflect on the real reason for the season, it's easy to only focus on the baby Jesus and His mother Mary. Joseph is often overlooked and forgotten.

After all, Joseph is a man we know very little about and there aren't any Christmas carols about him that I know of. He has no recorded words in the Bible and Saint Paul doesn't reference him in any of his writings. There's a lot of debate among scripture scholars about how old he was when Jesus was born. The last time he appears in any Gospel is in Saint Luke's when 12 year-old Jesus is found in the temple after having gone missing for three days. Plus, there's no mention of his death in the scriptures. He just seems to fade away and is absent by the time of Jesus' public ministry.

But that doesn't mean he isn't important. It's quite the opposite actually. The Church wants to remind us of this so she selects a Gospel for this final Sunday of Advent that focuses on the forgotten person of the Nativity, Saint Joseph.

To better understand this man, it helps to have some background behind all this talk of engagement, betrothal, and divorce because it's quite different from our world. You see, evidently, in those days, people married in stages.

The first stage was engagement. This happened when a boy and a girl were very young and it was arranged by their families. Marriage was much too important to be left up to mere whims and feelings. The parents made the engagement.

The second stage was the betrothal. At this point, the couple accepted the engagement decided by their parents. They could separate before the betrothal but to separate after required a formal legal procedure. A year or so after the betrothal came the solemn marriage, which was final. In our Gospel story, Joseph and Mary were at the middle stage when Joseph is told to not be afraid about taking Mary as his wife.

Even though we may not know much about Joseph, we do know he was a man of commitment and a man who trusted in God's plan for his life. He truly loved Mary and refused to subject her to a demeaning public divorce process. He was ready to separate quietly and save her from public shame and possible stoning. He trusted in God's word and never looked back. He was committed to Mary and to Jesus.

Talk of commitment today leaves many people uneasy. We live in a time that equates commitment with a loss of freedom. We're told commitment means a surrender of options and depriving ourselves of personal preferences. Our culture tries to teach us to avoid commitment at all costs. And it seems to be working. Divorce rates are sky high but more alarming is how low the marriage rate has fallen. People aren't as willing to commit to marry as they once were.

We're all aware of the aftermath of the failure to keep our commitments. Take a look around in our families, in public life, and in the Church. Infidelity in marriage, dishonesty in public life, and shattered vows in religious life have caused so much suffering and cynicism. It does more damage to our society than any terrorist ever could.

Joseph could have walked away from his commitment to Mary and Jesus. He could have turned his back on a love story that had gone awry. But he didn't. His actions spoke louder than any words of his that could have been recorded in scripture. Just like Joseph, we're known by our commitments. It's been said that our character is revealed not by the number of options we leave open in life but by the commitments we embrace. The truth is we're judged not by what we start but by what we finish." Christmas is a good time to renew our commitments to our families, our vocation, our work, and our Church.

Sometimes honoring our commitments isn't easy though. But it gets easier when we put our trust in where God is leading us, even in the face of fear. Joseph was afraid just like King Ahaz in our first reading. The difference is how the two men reacted to that fear. When Ahaz heard the words from the prophet Isaiah about a virgin conceiving and having a son, he was afraid for the wrong reason. He was afraid of the kingdoms of the north, which were threatening his own kingdom. Isaiah was calling Ahaz to trust in God – even to ask Him for a sign. But Ahaz refused because he wanted to put his trust in Assyria instead.

In stark contrast to Ahaz is Joseph. Sure he was human. He was flawed. He was probably prone to doubt, anger, selfishness, and sin – just like all of us. He may have spent a lot of his time praying for patience, or a job, or good health – just as we all do. He knew fear and may have even known despair. But he also knew trust. Joseph listened and responded to what he heard. He dared to believe the unbelievable and surrender his doubt to God. He took to heart the message of an angel.

And not just any message. The message we just heard in the Gospel is so critical that is often called the "other annunciation". Like Mary at the first annunciation, Joseph took a leap of faith. He put his trust in God and as a result, a family was formed – a Holy Family.

God's work can only be accomplished when we give our assent. God's will can only be fulfilled when we cooperate. We're all called, like Joseph, to cooperate with God and to collaborate with Him in His plan for our lives. We're called to fulfill a dream: God's dream for us.

Doing that requires one of the hardest things many of us can muster, which is trust. But all we need to do is turn our eyes toward the manger to be reminded of what that kind of trust can accomplish. We can raise our eyes towards the consecrated host elevated by Father Jacek in a few minutes to realize, with a humbling clarity, what can come from dreaming, and listening, and responding to the will of God.

Brothers and sisters, these final hours of Advent present us with an opportunity to continue to prepare the world for the arrival of our Lord. But they also ask us do something more - to prepare ourselves to live out the dream God has for our lives and to trust in God's will. Pray that we don't waste the chance to be like Saint Joseph. Pray that we learn from the example of this great man and become people known for the commitments we honor, people who put their trust in God, even in the face of fear.