

4th Sun. of Advent (A)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
December 17, 18, 2016

Rarely do we ever get to spend time with Joseph. Actually only on this 4th Sunday of Advent, and only in this particular Cycle of Scriptures. The exceptions are two: Joseph's Feast Day, March 19, and May 1, the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker. So I thought it good to use Joseph as a basis for reflection today. But first the story of another man ...

One day a young couple takes their 3 pre-school aged children to play in the park. The park was any child's delight ... even the kind that makes adults wish they were children again ... swings, monkey bars, see-saws, and slides. This particular park had 3 slides – a small, a medium-sized, and a really high one. Seeing these, the couple's eldest child, 5 years old, darted immediately to the smaller slid. The wife suggested that dad go down the slid with him. But dad said, “I have another idea. Let's wait to see what happens.”

The child did the small slide several times without a hitch. He then moved over to the medium-sized slide. He climbed half way up – stopped, looked over at his dad – the father looked away, so as not to interfere with the whole process going on in his son.

The mother says, “Honey, you really ought to go over there and help him”. “Not yet”, said the father. The little boy backed down the slide, one step at a time. On the ground he looked up at the slide, saw other children climbing and whizzing down. Finally, his little mind was made up and he climbed up the slide and slid down ... 3 times in fact.

Then they saw their son turn and head for the highest slide. Now the mother was really anxious, saying, “I don't think he should do that by himself. Do you?” “No”, the dad said, “but I don't think he will. Let's see what he does.” He said this with a little wink in his eye, to let his wife know that he was watching everything that was going on very carefully.

The little boy reached the bottom of the highest slide. He turned to his dad and called out “Daddy”. The father again gave him little attention, pretending not even to hear him. He peered up the ladder ... to his little imagination it probably looked like it reached the clouds. He watched a teen-aged boy go whizzing down, and then he started up the steps himself. Step by step, hand over hand. He had only gotten 1/3 of the way up and he froze. The teen-aged boy was right behind him, yelling for him to get going. But the little boy couldn't. He couldn't go up or down. He had reached a point of certain failure.

The father rushed over and said, “Are you okay, son?” The little boy looked down at him, shaken, but still clinging to the ladder with determination, and asked, “Dad, will you come down the slide with me?” The teenager was losing patience, but the father

knew he had a special moment here. He asked, "Why?" looking up at his little face. The little boy said, "I can't do it without you, Dad. It's too high for me."

The father reached up and lifted his son down into his arms. They then climbed the ladder together, and came down the slide together, the little boy between his father's legs, and laughing all the way.

At what point in today's gospel story did Joseph say to God, "I can't do this without you. I need your help!" Isaiah is clear about our openness to ask God for help.

During these next days, families will gather, and major questions about life can sometimes find their way into the conversation:

- marriage of a child – a pending engagement or even the announcing of an engagement just pledged. But today these aren't always the simple boy meets girl situations. Joseph's situation in today's gospel isn't the customary Jewish experience either. So, the engagement is to someone who is not Christian – maybe to someone Jewish, maybe to someone who is Muslim or Buddhist. So ...the engagement is to someone of the same sex. Or, maybe the conversation is not exactly about marriage, but just the initial announcement of a family member's same sex attraction.
- or maybe it is not about marriage at all: you bring up the conversation that Uncle Harry or Aunt Sally is actually a drunk and in addition to ruining his/her own life, is also disrupting the family.

In any of these situations, we are similar to Joseph ... I can't do this without you, God?"

-or, maybe a son/daughter wants to talk about their vocation to priesthood, religious life. Immediately you realize that this means that son/daughter does not carry on the family farm, or become the doctor/business person you always dreamed about, and also that there will be no grandchildren from that particular person, you say, "I can't do this without you, God!"

The lesson for us is that in none of these situations should we feel that we can't do this at all. What it does mean is that you just can't do it as easily as you would like, and you just can't certainly do it alone. This is where a faith-sharing group is really important. You pray about these matters with some friends, ... you take these matters to a spiritual mentor or guide. The little boy could not do the big slide alone, but with his dad he did. Joseph's Jewish upbringing was not enough to face his challenges of engagement to Mary. But both the little boy and Joseph succeeded when they depended on God. Do not weary God, says Isaiah, by refusing to ask. Do not give up on your hopes and dreams because you feel stuck only half way up the ladder. Do not think, and do not expect too small. God reaches out to you and cradles you in his arms. Soon and very soon, God even come to live among us in the flesh. O come, Emmanuel.