

Baccalaureate Mass

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Readings: Jer. 23:5-8; Matt. 1:18-25

In the course of your time here at USF, this nation has experienced the sharpest economic downturn since the great depression, a dramatic rise in unemployment, skyrocketing home foreclosures, two wars that are draining our resources and clouding our vision, legislators mired in partisan brinkmanship of the worst kind and unwilling to focus on the common good of us all. We need something to sustain us through these dark times.

In today's first reading the prophet Jeremiah offers fellow Jews who are suffering the savageries of a foreign invasion and tasting the bitter fruits of corrupt, incompetent leadership the dream of a bright future ushered in by one sent from God to "govern wisely" and "do what is just" and thereby lead Israel to peace and security. Jeremiah offers this dream to a people enveloped in darkness and despair.

The Joseph of today's Gospel evokes memories of another Joseph. That other Joseph of the Exodus story also had a dream. He also went into Egypt. He also saved his people from hopelessness and despair. The King Herod of our Christmas story recalls Pharaoh; both of them killed innocent male children to eliminate a perceived threat, only to have God protect the life of the one who "will save his people."

We see that Joseph in the Gospel, like the Israel of Jeremiah or the Hebrews of the Exodus, was near despair at the collapse of his life's dream of building a family and making a life together with the woman he loved most in all the world. The woman who was to be his life's partner was bearing the child of someone else. Understand that according to the custom of that time to be "betrothed" was to be legally "married" but not yet living together nor allowed sexual relations. Jewish law was particularly strict with regard to a couple's remaining celibate during the betrothal phase of their marriage. During the betrothal year, the woman stayed with her parents, while the young man focused on his occupation and securing the resources to build a house and support his family. Be clear that Joseph and Mary are legally married in the eyes of the community but not living together, so Mary's pregnancy came not simply as a surprise but as the ultimate humiliation and a stunning shattering of all Joseph's dreams. His much loved wife was an apparent adulteress.

But then something remarkable occurred, and Joseph began to make his own God's dream for the world. Joseph began to see beneath the apparent wreckage of his life the emergence of hope and salvation for all the people and himself. Joseph began to let go of his own plans in order to fulfill whatever it was that God was asking of him through this most difficult and demoralizing situation. Joseph acquiesced to God's plan by accepting the child in Mary's womb as his very own. Recall that Jesus was an adopted son, given his legitimacy and legal status in the community only because Joseph accepted him as his own son. This makes me realize how many adopting parents have similarly accepted as their own a child of uncertain parentage and thereby realized God's dreams for them and their child. Because Joseph's hopes for himself gave way to God's hopes for the world, "God is with us" to "save us".

Jesus was made flesh in Bethlehem as the son of Joseph and Mary. Centuries ago, St. Clement of Alexandria insisted that in Jesus, God became a human being so that we might learn from a human being how to become like God. Were it not for the cooperation of Joseph and Mary, were it not for their willingness to trust “God is with us” at their darkest of moments, had they not said “yes” to God, God’s great hopes for us would not be realized.

Joseph is the model of a person who fearlessly sets aside his own carefully laid-out plans in favor of God’s gracious dreams for the world. God, like the good parents of an infant, loves us all unconditionally before we are even able to choose between good and evil. God does not tell us, “I will love you if you keep my commandments.” God simply says, “I love you.” God, like a good parent, loves us and earnestly hopes that we will respond to that love. We are free to say “no” just as a child can reject her parents’ love. Just as Joseph could have said, “no” to Mary and to God. God keeps at us, never abandoning us, no matter what. In the face of this God, we may, like Joseph, set our fears aside and embrace whatever it is that God asks of us because “God is with us” to “save us.”

The God who pursues us speaks to us from the deep recesses of our hearts, through “the better angels of our nature,” through the cries of the poor and defenseless, through our hopes and dreams of a world where all men and women live in dignity and enjoy their fair share of the earth’s resources.

God’s dreams are not so much the dreams that come to us in sleep, but the noble impulses rooted in our deepest desires and most profound and heartfelt beliefs. One ignores those God-authored impulses and deeply-seated desires at great risk. The African American writer, Langston Hughes underscored those risks in his poem: *Harlem: A Dream Deferred*.

*What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore--  
And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load. Or does it explode?*

My prayer for you graduates is that your lives mirror Joseph’s in your fearlessly living God’s dreams for you and for our world. None of us need ever be afraid to dream with Jesus of a world where “all are one,” where we feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowing, visit the imprisoned, care for the sick and bring good news to the poor because “God is with us” We must, however, fear that we be impervious to God’s dreams and they may dry up, or become infected with vanity and self-seeking, or spoil from neglect, or harden and crust over with blind ambition, or become a burden of regret over lost opportunities or explode into anger and despair.

May you remain open to God’s voice and may that openness lead you to do good things for God’s people. Like the prophet Jeremiah and like Joseph may your lives witness to God’s desire to be “with us” “to save” this broken world of ours. As we gather together around this table, we move a bit closer towards God’s hopes for us and our world – a world where all men and women sit down together to share a meal in peace.