

Readings: 2 Samuel 7: 4-5a, 12-14a, 16 | Ps. 89 | Romans 4: 13, 16-18, 22 | Matthew 1: 16, 18-21, 24a

Grace: To know the grace to know we walk on a firm foundation.

The eighth day - the day of resurrection, new creation and fullness of life. The fact that day nine awaits us tomorrow is the gravy on top. We've looked at our relationship with God and the ways God walks with us from the sweeping and spacious cosmos to the intricate detail of the cells that make up our bodies, and God's Word who nourishes us like the rains that arrive on the water cycle to make the earth fruitful. From the miracle of birth (my new nephew is one week old today) to an experience of God even as a father comes to terms with the impending death of his son. From the gift of unexpected friendships blossoming in unlikely places to a tender mercy that shines on the just and on the unjust alike. A God who remains faithful to generation upon generation, a God who does not look away from the pain and trauma of the survivors of sexual abuse. A God whose Spirit is at work even now, filling in the contours of God's dream for God's church.

We've been standing on holy and sacred ground as we've shared our needs and petitions. The novena is a tradition passed down from the 17th century. Yesterday Fr. John Topel, SJ shared with me that the old novena prayer came to him while he was sitting here in the St. Ignatius chapel. He hadn't prayed it in over 30 years, but he still knows it word for word: "...In asking this favor, I am fully resigned to the Divine Will. I pray and desire only to obtain that which is most conducive to the greater glory of God and the greater good of my soul." In the end, my only wish is for whatever gives glory to God and is good for my health in body, mind and spirit.

This could be Joseph's prayer, the prayer of the dreamer. Like Abraham and Sarah before him, like St. Francis Xavier who set sail for Asia never to see his home or his friends again, Joseph steps out on faith. He steps into the mystery of a God known more through experience than through the law. Joseph's old dream might have been along the lines of the safe and comfortable - it's the way things have always been. Mary would live under his roof. She would be his wife and they would raise their children together. These same children would care for them in their old age.

God has other plans. Mary is with child, it looks to Joseph like she has been unfaithful, the old dream is in shambles. And here at the crossroads, worn out and tired with the weight of the heartbreak of a life and family that might not be - burdened with a heavy decision - he has a vision.

The angel of the Lord comes to him, calling him by name, "*Joseph, son of David, **Do not be afraid!** Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" In this, the place of his deepest fear and worry, this is where the Good News of God's plan meets him. Do not be afraid! Your great burden will become your greatest blessing. In letting go of the old dream, Joseph creates room to allow this new dream take shape in him. Imagine Joseph's trust! He knows that it is God who keeps him grounded. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once

described faith as taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. Joseph boldly sets out along a new way God has set before him. This will all work out for the greater good, the greater glory of God!

As for Joseph so also for us: even when uncertainty, doubt, confusion and contradictions swirl around us we can find our solid ground. In the midst of our fears and distress for our loved ones battling with an addiction, or undergoing treatment for cancer or struggling to find a job - in the midst of our anxiety over final exams or as we enter into the later stages of life, or as we mourn the end of a relationship - God does not turn away from us. Even here we experience that place where we are known and loved, where we are called by name. Do not be afraid! This may be the very place where the Spirit comes to meet us, overturning our expectations and opening a new way forward.

I once heard an interview where John Lewis, representative from the state of Georgia, recalled the struggle and the promise of racial justice in the 1950s and 60s. His body was beaten and broken on several occasions, but he never responded in kind. Time and time again he went right back into the heart of the conflict. How did he do it? What gave him the courage and strength? He believed things would get better and he says he discovered that "you have to have this sense of faith that what you're moving toward is already done. It's already happened. It's the power to believe - even in the midst of the maelstrom - that you can see that sense of community, that sense of family, that sense of one house. And you live that you're already there, that you're already in that community, part of that sense of one family, one house. If you visualize it," he says, "it is already there."

Of course, the struggle for racial justice continues to this day. These are hard times for the Church and for our country and our world, times made difficult by the seduction of security and comfort at all costs, by the powerful and privileged few who try to prevent truth-telling and active listening and by the damage done to sea and sky and soil. Now is the acceptable time to step in to God's dream - to lean into God's reign - to allow it to take shape in us. As we mourn the passing of the old dream and move into uncharted territory, we walk on solid ground with the God who walks with us, opening up that way that will lead to God's greater glory. May we pray with the collect prayer for this solemnity of St. Joseph "O God, may your Church constantly watch over the unfolding of the mysteries of salvation."

Fr. Matt Holland, S.J.
Day 8 | March 19, 2019