

## *The Second Sunday after Christmas “ Believe, Listen, Respond”*

*Jer 31:7-14; Ps 84; Eph 1:3-6,15-19a; Mt 2:13-15,19-23*

Have you ever been stuck in a quandary, a challenging situation, and you didn't know what to do, which way to turn? Well, poor Joseph seems to have his share of challenging situations. Engaged to a pregnant woman, forced to stay in a stable while his fiancé gives birth, hunted by a King who thinks Joseph's family are revolutionaries intending to over-throw the Kingdom, and Joseph has no place to hide. After all, he just went to Bethlehem to be “registered” so it's not like the King can't find him, eventually. All in all, things are looking pretty bleak for a certain carpenter-builder.

My guess is that Joseph can serve as a pretty good role model for the rest of us whenever we find ourselves confronted by overwhelming circumstances. So let's take a close look at Joseph. Three times, Joseph finds himself in difficult situations and three times God comes to Joseph. Three times we see a similar pattern:

Joseph: 1) Believes in God and God's Providence; he 2) Listens and ‘believes’ God will act, that if he appeals to God, that God will respond. And, 3) Joseph Responds or Acts upon what God tells him, no matter how crazy it may seem.

Joseph finds himself surrounded by overwhelming circumstances. The darkness in the world can be a powerful thing—whether it be COVID-19, war, dictators, or cruel and paranoid kings like Herod. The challenge is to have faith in the Power and Light of God—certain that the light will prevail—even when it seems that it can't, that the darkness is too great. By hanging on, firm in our belief that our God is an Awesome God, *El Shaddai*—the Almighty One—it empowers us to do seemingly crazy things too.

To put Joseph's situation into our terms, it's like being targeted by the Mob or Drug Cartels, and God says, “*Ok, don't tell anybody, but just pack-up your family and move to Zimbabwe!*” And, you do! Then a few years later, when the ‘bad guys’ are no longer interested in you, God says, “*It's safe for you to go back now, but Virginia still doesn't look that promising so maybe you better move to Idaho.*” And you do! It all sounds crazy, but then perhaps that helps to remind us that God is in control, .....not us.

If we just Believe, Listen, and Respond according to God's plan all will be well. Mind you, God does not make “bad things” happen so that he can come riding in like the Lone Ranger to save us and redeem us. On the contrary, in our broken humanity, we are the ones who cause all of the pain and sorrow—cause all of the bad things to happen. And it is God, who takes those human-created, often self-created, situations and works to bring good out of the bad.

It's certainly not God's plan that a paranoid and viciously cruel King Herod would slaughter thousands of young infants on the outside chance that one might be the next usurping King of the Jews. But God can take that man-made situation and turn it into a salvific event that can be understood by anyone who knows God's earlier revelations to the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Malachi, to name a few.

Jeremiah understood that the Exiled Jews would one day return from Babylon. He understood that God is the Father of Israel and that God would redeem his people. Hosea prophesied that “*Out of Egypt, God would call his son.*” [Hos 2.15] 800 years later, the disciples realized that Hosea wasn't talking about an ancient historical event centered on Moses and the Exodus. Hosea was talking about Jesus, God's own Son, the very embodiment of Israel and all humanity. God had a plan and God still has a plan!

In the Letter to the Ephesians, we are assured that our salvation has been God's plan, God's great gift to us, from the very beginning—that we would all become the children of God, brought out of darkness and into the light. But we must believe that he is there for us—calling us, reaching out to us. In the darkness, we can't “see” God, so we must learn to listen, certain that God is there for us.

It's like faith and belief are the lenses that allow us to see and hear the amazing world that God has created for us. In the movie, *The Polar Express*, a little boy does not believe in Christmas, so he cannot see Christmas for the miracle that it is. More importantly, he cannot hear the bells on Santa's sleigh like the other children do. Only after many life-altering adventures does the little boy come to "believe." Suddenly he now "sees" the true wonder of Christmas and he finally hears the sleigh bells ring. The bells were ringing all the time, but in his unbelief, he could not hear them.

Joseph really is a perfect role model for us. When times are difficult and we don't know where to turn, we act like Joseph and turn to God. Simply Believe that God cares about you, because he loves you so dearly. Believe that you can share your problems with God. And then Listen carefully for what God would have you do. And then, you Respond—whether it's waiting patiently or doing something that seems to make no sense. Simply: Believe, Listen, and Respond.

When we Believe, Listen, and Respond, we discover (as did our beloved Saint Thomas at the last) that in Christ our God,

*"Even a sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nesting place...  
at your altar, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God." Ps 84.3*

### **What are the implications and meanings for *you* in today's readings?**

1. Spend some time reflecting upon why today's lesson from the Old Testament [*Jeremiah 31:7-14*] is paired with today's Gospel reading.
  - a. What parallels do you see?
2. Joseph is only one of the four New Testament personages referred to as "*righteous*" [*Mt 1:19*]. People named as "Righteous." **OT**: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lot, & David; **NT**: Joseph and John the Baptist and his parents: Elizabeth and Zechariah [Abraham is also mentioned by St. Paul in his *Letters to the Romans & Galatians*].
  - a. How they might be role models for you?
  - b. What does it mean to you, as a Christian, to be considered righteous before God?
  - c. Galatians 3:11b says: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." Consider what "righteous" means to you.
3. What God told Joseph to do was not easy. Consider the times when God may have been asking you to do something that is not easy. How did you respond?

### **For the Biblical Scholars**

- Jeremiah 31:9e says: "*I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.*" To what and/or whom is God referring? Who is Israel and who is Ephraim?
- What is the context of Jeremiah's prophecy? What is the "*land of the north*" [31:8]?
- The *Letter to the Ephesians* says in 1:4 "*just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.*" What does that mean theologically?