

## Trust

**“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took (Mary as) his wife.” (Mt. 1:18:24)**

President Ronald Reason signed the first nuclear arms reduction treaty with the Soviet Union in December 1987. Before the negotiation process began, he gave his negotiators this guiding principle: “Trust, but verify.” When in September, 1963, I went off to Columbia College in New York City, a naïve 18 year old freshman, my father cautioned me: “Don’t trust nobody.” To ensure that only luck and skill determine the winning hand, a savvy poker player always cuts the deck.

*Frank was admitted to the hospital for prostate surgery – or so the surgeon and hospital staff thought. You can imagine their surprise when the retired, 84-year old refused to sign the consent form and angrily pushed away the lab technician who approached him to do one of the pre-surgical work-ups. Why, then, had Frank come to the hospital? Well, it seemed that he had entered the hospital solely to appease his daughter and granddaughter. While he was prepared to stay there for as long they wanted, he was unmovable about surgery. He just wasn't going to have any!*

*After repeated efforts to change his mind failed, Nancy, his nurse, decided to find out why he was refusing. When she asked what was troubling him about the surgery, and if there was anything he didn't understand, he told her that it was she who didn't understand. He seemed somewhat taken aback when she asked him to tell her what it was she didn't understand, but he told her.*

*It turned out that his reluctance dated back to a work experience of his youth, when his boss would assign the most dangerous jobs to men he didn't like. The men did what they were told because they feared losing their jobs, and a number of them were seriously injured. When*

*Nancy responded by saying it seemed as if he didn't trust people, he replied: "nope, I don't: I can't be sure whether what they're telling me is for my own good or if they've trying to take advantage of me."*

*The two continued to talk, with Nancy taking his hand and telling him that the decision was his, but he should know that they were only interested in helping him. She left and shared what she had learned with the surgeon. When she later returned for one last try, she found a smiling Frank who, after just getting off the phone with the surgeon, turned to the nurse for confirmation that the doctor was "...a good guy..." who had "...no reason to hurt me..." and declared that he would undergo the operation. This experience reaffirmed for Nancy that simply listening and showing you care can go a long way toward building trust.*

Trusting others can, indeed, be difficult at times, particularly if you've had bad experiences in that department, which happens to just about all of us. Trusting involves letting go, giving up control, and, yes, taking risks. It involves making yourself vulnerable to someone who may disappoint or even hurt you. It requires willingness to consider another's needs in addition to your own. With all due respect to my dad, a wise man with little formal education in his native Italy who came through Ellis Island in 1913, it is equally foolish to trust no one as it is to trust everyone. In retrospect, I've concluded that my going away to college advice was purposely couched in "Sicilian hyperbole," exaggerated language, to have a better chance to sink into my thick adolescent skull. Obviously, my dad was warning me to be on the lookout for shady characters I would no doubt encounter in the Big Apple.

If there's one thing Mary and Joseph needed in connection with the birth of Jesus, it was, trust. Mary had to trust that even though she was a virgin, she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit, the probability of which, of course, then as now, surely tested the limits of credibility.

Mary trusted, and it happened as the angel said. Joseph had to trust that Mary's pregnancy was indeed by the Holy Spirit and not from the usual method which, under Jewish law, would have subjected her to death by stoning. Joseph trusted, and received Mary into his home as his wife.

Admittedly, trusting can be a challenging, yet it's essential in three important instances. First and foremost, to in trust in God... as Mary and Joseph did.

*A severe drought threatened the crops of a village in Crete. The priest told his flock: "There isn't anything that will save us, except a special litany for rain. Go to your homes, fast during the week, trust in God, and come back next Sunday for the litany of rain." The villagers heard him, fasted during the week and went to church the following Sunday morning, but as soon as the priest saw them, he was furious. He said, "Go away; I will not do the litany. You do not trust in God." "But Father," they protested, "we fasted and we trust." "Trust?" he said. "Then where are your umbrellas?"*

Scripture teaches that when life takes an unexpected and painful turn, you don't have to face it alone or understand *why* it's happening. You just need to put your trust in God. That, of course, doesn't mean that you don't have to do whatever you can to improve the situation...like seeking medical care or getting into a twelve step program. God, after all, helps those who help themselves. It does mean, however, that once you've done everything within your own limited power to make things right, you can take comfort in knowing that your misfortune is in the hands of the One with *ultimate* power and *infinite* wisdom, who remains by your side, especially when you're in trouble. Besides trusting in God, we need to trust in one another, just as Mary and Joseph did.

*One day a mother took her eight year old daughter to the circus. The child was absolutely thrilled by the trapeze artists as they swung back and forth high in the air, catching*

*each other at the last moment. As the little girl was watching, she turned to her mother and said excitedly, "Aren't they scared, Momma? Aren't they scared?"*

*Before her mother could answer, a man in the row in front of them turned and said to the child, "Honey, they aren't scared. They trust each other. There was a brief silence and then someone else said "That guy should know. He used to perform on the high wire himself."*

Can you imagine a marriage without trust? Divorce courts, of course, are filled with them. What would happen in families where parents refused to trust their children, or children couldn't trust their parents? And I surely saw a lot of them in my 20 years as a Monroe County family court judge. How long would friends stay friends if they didn't trust each other? Relationships, our families, our friends, our acquaintances, are among God's greatest gift to us. But, we all have free will so can choose to reject the gift. A poet once said: "*We are each of us angels with only one wing, and we can only fly by embracing one another*"... which isn't possible without you know what.

Finally there's the most difficult trust of all...far more difficult than trusting in God or trusting in each other. It's trusting in yourself... in your own goodness, your own value. It's trusting that God made you and me to for a particular and essential purpose.

Mary and Joseph had to make this difficult act of trust. They did it. And into their family was born the Savior of the world...Emmanuel "God is with us," whose birthday we celebrate once again in a few short days.

God, you see, sends each of us into the world, just like Jesus himself, with a special and essential mission. And if we don't accomplish that mission, a part of God's plan goes unfulfilled. A part of God's glory goes unseen. Someone's heartfelt prayer goes unanswered. No one is too young or too old or too infirm to do his or her part in making the world a better place.

And there's no such thing as an insignificant act of love. In short, regardless of who we are, each of us has an indispensable job to do...nothing less than helping bring about God's kingdom on earth... which Jesus was born to inaugurate 2000 plus years ago.

We all yearn, of course, for the coming of the kingdom in its fullness at the end of time, Jesus' *second* coming, but it can't happen unless we all commit ourselves to work for peace and justice in the here and now; to spread God's love so that our world can move closer to fulfilling Isaiah's vision of the "peaceful kingdom" when the lion lies down with the lamb – a favorite theme of this season of advent quickly coming to an end..

Helping to building the kingdom on earth...what better reason to trust can possibly top that?

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Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24.

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (Cycle A) December 19, 2010