

Baccalaureate Mass

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Matthew, the author of the gospel for your baccalaureate liturgy, has a favorite literary device that he uses to drive his point home: he “bookends” his narrative. For example at the beginning of the gospel, the magi make the first act of faith in Jesus and they are Gentiles. At the conclusion of the Gospel, a Roman centurion – also a Gentile – makes the final act of faith in Jesus when he says: “truly this is the Son of God.” Similarly, years at USF began with The Mass of the Holy Spirit here in St. Ignatius Church which towers so prominently over this campus and our city. Today’s baccalaureate liturgy is the bookend to your years on the Hilltop.

There is also a bookend in today’s gospel. After the angel came to Joseph and told him to take Mary as his wife, Matthew states that this fulfilled what the prophets wrote: “The virgin shall give birth to a son and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” The name “Emmanuel” travels to the very last line of Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus declares, “And remember, *I am with you* always; yes, even to the end of time.”

Matthew is telling us that Emmanuel, “God with us” is what Jesus is all about. And Jesus is telling us that God is all about “being with us.” The Gospel is the story of the presence of God in our lives and in our world from beginning to end – in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. The point of this morning’s Gospel story is that God is with us even in the most disturbing and unsettling moments.

Today’s Gospel story reeks of ordinariness. What could be more natural, more ordinary, more repeated throughout human history than two people and their families planning a marriage? What could be more devastating than discovering that one’s fiancée is pregnant by another? A heart-broken Joseph, on the brink of despair, decided not to create a public scene and expose Mary to punishment and humiliation by quietly stepping out of her life. Perhaps he hoped that the child’s father would step forward. Well the true “father” does step forward, but in a most amazing way!

God put the record straight for Joseph in a dream. Not only are things not as disreputable as they seem, but Joseph’s dream calls him to play a role in realizing God’s larger dream for us all. The shattering of Joseph’s particular dream gives rise to something completely new and unexpected. What upset the ordinary, normal pattern for two people set the pattern right for all of us. The pattern set by Jesus for all of us is a simple one: It is a life lived in this truth: there is one God who is mother and father of us all, and we are most authentically ourselves when we live together as brothers and sisters – the sons and daughters of one God.

There is a wonderful story from the Jewish tradition that captures the truth of Jesus and the heart of the Gospel message. The rabbi asked his students how they could tell when night had ended and day was beginning.

“Could it be,” asked one student, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

“Could it be,” asked another, “when you can look at a tree and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?”

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Well, then, when is it?” demanded his students.

“It is when you look into the face of any woman or man and see that they are your sister or brother. Because if you cannot do this, no matter what time it is, it is still night.”

Where we are able to love rather than hate; to forgive rather than seek revenge; to deal gently with one another rather than harshly, where we are messengers of peace rather than agents violence – that’s how and where light shines on the deep shadows in our lives and our world. That is how and where we know *God with us*.

In our struggle to live the truth of our humanity, the story of Joseph is an encouraging one. It shows us that something good can come from what seems to be a complete mess. What we learn, even when we are the cause of the mess, is that God does not walk out of the process but stays with us. More often than not, God is strength and courage to muddle through, rather than clarity and certainty about the outcome. Our challenge is to be attentive to those moments when God is trying to break through to us. Our challenge is to be receptive to the strength being offered and the hope being reinforced by *God with us*.

It is clear from the story that God would not have taken flesh and dwelled among us without Mary and Joseph’s strength and courage. If Joseph had allowed fear and anxiety to smother his dream and cancel his marriage to Mary, God’s desire to be with us in Jesus would have been frustrated. We would not know God without Jesus, and we would we not know Jesus without the courage and fidelity of Joseph and Mary to each other and to God. God works through our strength and courage to be with us at this moment of history.

You might have begun your experience at USF with anxiety and some trepidation; there were surely moments when you thought this day might never come. If you questioned whether your parents and friends would stand with you through the difficulties and challenges you faced in the course of your education, today those doubts are resolved. You may realize today that *God is with you* through it all – that the love and support behind this moment remains with you in the days ahead.

We pray for you and for ourselves on this day when you leave the Hilltop and step into the future. We pray for hope to see through those parts of our lives we find most confusing. We pray for the courage to take one step at a time into the darkness, trusting that God walks with us through the blind spots of our journey. We pray that we are aware of *God with us* – when we see only shadows and confusion. As the story turned out, when Joseph thought that his world had turned upside down and he had reached a dead end, God was doing a very good thing for him and for all of us.

May God continue do good things for you and through you for all of us. May your lives be light for all those who live in darkness and may you be gladness for the sorrowing and the broken hearted. May you be *God with us* now and forever.