

“She will bear a son and you are to name him ...Jesus... .”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, a man explained:

“My wife and I had never met before our wedding. Both of us were brought up in the old Chinese way. It was our parents who engaged us to each other when we were barely six years old. In my early teens, I came to know where her house was. I had an intense desire to have a glimpse of her. In returning from school, I sometimes took a roundabout way, so as to pass by her house.... BUT, I never had the good fortune to see her.”

The man goes on to say that he realizes the old, Chinese, marriage system sounds incredible to the Western mind. Some of his Western friends could hardly believe it at first.

He says he was surprised his friends found the system so incredible. So, he asked them whether they chose their parents, brothers, or sisters. Upon receiving the reply, he said:

“And don’t you love them just the same?”

That true story helps us better understand the relationship between Joseph & Mary before Jesus was born.

How so, you ask?

Well...I am glad you asked that question!

*You see, Jewish marriage custom included **3 steps**:*

1st step was the ‘engagement.’

The engagement was often worked out by the parents or a Jewish matchmaker. The young couple often didn’t know each other prior to the engagement. The song, “Matchmaker,” from the play/movie ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’ celebrates this arrangement.

2nd step was the ‘betrothal.’—BETWEEN Engagement & Marriage

The betrothal lasted about a year and gave the couple a chance to get to know each other. Once the betrothal took place, the couple was actually known as man & wife, although they did not live together as man and wife (or in any OTHER way –if you know what I mean!). Here’s a key-point about this system, betrothal was so solemn that it could be terminated... ONLY... by... divorce!

3rd step was the actual ‘marriage’-proper--There’s no explanation necessary for this phase.

*Now, it was in the **2nd step** of the Jewish, marriage custom that Joseph learned Mary was pregnant, that is, ‘with child’ ...which, with this little expose`, explains why Joseph felt the need to divorce her, albeit quietly, even though they weren’t permanently married with the 3rd step.*

BUT, they were ‘betrothed,’ which was legally binding according to Jewish custom & law!

*We, now, better understand the relationship between Joseph & Mary **before** Jesus was born.*

Now, I will turn the page, so to speak, and address another element of ‘social-custom’ that plays a major part of American, as well as, International ‘custom,’ especially so, as we enter into this 4th (& final) Week of Advent.

What, exactly, is this ‘major part of American,’ as well as, ‘International’ social-custom, you ask?

Well, once again ...I am glad you asked that question!

And the answer is... (Whisper→)... “Santa Claus!”

Once upon a time, there was a delightful Peanuts cartoon, which appeared around Christmas time. It showed Linus reading to Charlie Brown the Gospel account about the birth of Jesus. When he finished, Linus turned to Charlie Brown and said:

“THAT’S what Christmas is all about, Charlie”

And adds...

“So, who needs Santa Claus?”

The jolly, old fellow, in his red & white suit and long, white beard is very much a part of our culture and, I believe, a magical and wonderful part of our youngest, children’s innocence. They ought not to be robbed of this glorious, only once-upon-a-young-lifetime ‘wonderment.’

At the same time, we must be very cautious to make certain our children realize that Santa is here because of **THE** Baby Jesus’ birthday. Connect the two! Clarify the source of all the joy and all the celebration! To accomplish this, that is, to keep the proper balance between fantasy of Santa and the reality of Jesus, it is imperative that we adults treasure the importance of that reality—of Jesus—ourselves!

God has always been present to us, 1st, in **Creation**—of the cosmos ...and 2nd, in his **Word**—of the scriptures. **BUT**, and this is a massive **BUT** ...with the birth of Jesus, his presence among us, at a particular place on earth and at a particular moment in time, took a giant leap forward. With the birth of Jesus, **‘Emmanuel’**, God became present among us in person.

Jesus’ birth made God present to us in a way we could... **see, touch, & hear**. This is what we are preparing to celebrate. This, we must inform our children, is why Santa leaves the North Pole after preparing the good, children’s gifts all year, to celebrate on Christmas: God’s presence among us in the flesh-and-blood person of **THE** baby, Jesus. When Santa, eventually, goes away, we still have Jesus ...forever and ever. When the magic evaporates, the Christ remains!

We were founded as a God-fearing country. Do **NOT** get caught up in all the political correctness, the commercialization, or the frenzy of the crowd. If you do, there will be the post-Christmas-blues ...the depression of **‘why did I bother --why did I fuss.’**

BUT,

If we adults stay focused on the reality of Christmas, we will share that joy with our children/grandchildren. We will delight in their sparkling eyes and squealing giggles. Together, we will bow before the manger...not at a fantasy, **but**... in pure awe.

I close with these words from the 1st chapter of the First Letter of John:

“What we have seen and heard, we announce to you also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship that we have with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

We write this in order that our joy may be complete.” 1Jn.1:3-4

May the peace, the love, and the joy of the true meaning of the season be, always, with you...

I pray so ...in the name of the Father, our Abba, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.