

do little for the women. She was shocked to learn the next morning that all three women had died. Ida went back to the U.S., entered medical school and was one of the first women graduates of the Cornell Medical College. She returned to India in 1900 and opened a one-bed clinic. Two years later she was able to expand to 40 beds. Today this is the 1,700 bed Christian Medical Hospital at Vellore, completely run by Indians. This is a different story from that of Jesus' birth. And yet in some ways it is like Joseph's story. Ida Scudder embraced the difficult experience and saw in it a calling for her life. A favorite prayer of Ida Scudder's is inscribed at the Low Cost Effective Care Unit, the inner city clinic, of Christian Medical Hospital:

*Father, whose life is within me and whose love is ever about me,  
grant that Thy life may be maintained in my life today and every day;  
that with gladness of heart, without haste or confusion of thought  
I may go about my daily tasks conscious of ability  
to meet every rightful demand,  
seeing the larger meaning of little things,  
and finding beauty and love everywhere;  
and, in the sense of Thy presence, may I walk through the hours  
breathing the atmosphere of love  
rather than anxious striving. [emphases are mine]*

God doesn't call all of us to found a hospital or college, or start some society-changing movement. But when we embrace the events and circumstances of our lives as Ida Scudder's prayer says, "seeing the larger meaning of little things," who knows what will happen? Who knows what God will be able to do in and through our lives? I think that's what the story of Jesus' birth is about.

December 23, 2007/Fourth Sunday of Advent/David L. Edwards

### **Called to Be Saints: Considering Joseph**

Romans 1:1-7

*To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Matthew 1:18-25

*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...*

Paul addresses his letter to "all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." He has just recalled the story of God's action in Jesus Christ, the one pointed to by scripture, particularly the prophets. He was "declared to be son of God" because of the power of resurrection. Through his life, death, and resurrection, we have received grace, the love of God freely given. But there is also the call to apostleship, our response to God's love, to live as those who are sent out by God in the spirit of Jesus to love and to serve. Paul's dramatic opening sentence culminates as he addresses the Christian community in Rome as those who are both beloved by God (God's grace) and called to be saints (apostleship). To me, that's the simplest way to put the life of faith: receiving the love of God in our own lives and living out of that love toward the world and its needs.

The Church of the Covenant tries to take Paul's words seriously. Staying in touch with God's love for us in Christ through the inward journey, rooting our lives daily in God's grace given in Jesus Christ. And living the life of apostleship, of those who are sent, through the outward journey, the things to which we feel ourselves called in response to the needs of our faith community itself or the world around us, beginning in Lynchburg.

So, we are called to be saints! That's what we are working on and working with as we take on an intentional spiritual life in the inward and outward dimensions. We are working on our sainthood! We don't like the word "saint." It sounds too...well, pretentious. We think saints are only those extraordinary folks through history who have achieved great things or gotten themselves killed for their faith or the like—Francis, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Paul would disagree with sainthood as something reserved for only a select group of spiritual superheroes, while the rest of us plod along, doing the best we can, but always feeling a little like second rate Christians. No, says Paul. All who love and follow Jesus are in the category of "saint." In Paul's view we are saints, or "holy ones," simply because we have given ourselves to following Jesus Christ, and are trying to live our lives with the love of God as our motivation in everything we do. Being a saint has

nothing to do with any special quality about us or cultivating a stuffy sanctimoniousness. It has to do with the journey we have chosen and are giving ourselves to. Like it or not, in Paul's view, we are saints and are called to be saints!

When you reserve "sainthood" for only an extraordinary few, then you take the responsibility for sainthood away from the rest of us. Or you end up just making people feel that they will never measure up to saint so-and-so, some past or present spiritual hero. The Christian life is not about living out of guilt, or comparison, or feelings of insufficiency. The Christian life is about personal responsibility for discovering and working with what discipleship means in our own unique lives and callings and gifts. To be a saint is to know you are loved by God, to receive that love daily at the center of your being, and to make that love the wellspring of your whole life. Being a saint means working with what that love means for the way we live, for what we do with these lives of ours for the sake of the world. And that is what we try to be about in the Church of the Covenant. We don't do it perfectly. Often we do it badly. But we try to make it clear for ourselves that we are called to be saints, those who respond to God's love in Jesus Christ by following the living Christ in the life of prayer and service, the inward and outward journeys.

Consider Joseph. Saint Joseph. Yes, he is in the lineage of David. That's important because the messiah is supposed to come from that kingly line. Other than that, Joseph is really nobody special. Joseph is engaged to Mary, a young girl. The word translated "virgin" can just as well be translated young girl. So let's not get hung up on the virginity of Mary as though that is the most important issue!

So Joseph finds out Mary is pregnant. Teen pregnancy is such a prominent reality these days that the force of this situation is lost on us. Mary is young, pregnant, and unwed. The child is not Joseph's, and this puts him and Mary in a terrible spot. She could be subjected to fierce social rejection at the least and even stoning at the worst. Joseph's response is really quite surprising. He decides to deal with the situation compassionately and quietly in order to spare Mary as much pain as he can. For all Joseph knew, his wife-to-be had been unfaithful. Whatever emotions—embarrassment, shame, anger, confusion-- were stirring in Joseph, he shows himself to be a man of compassion who is trying to ease suffering as much as he can.

Joseph has a dream. In his dream God tells him to go ahead and take Mary as his wife. This child is something God is doing. God is in the midst of this confusing, troubling, and difficult situation, doing something special for the world. Joseph listens to the dream and acts on what he hears. He takes Mary as his wife and when the child is born, he names him Jesus, which literally means "God saves." Joseph has allowed himself to become part of what God is doing. He doesn't understand it. He may feel overwhelmed by the situation. But he has listened to that deeper voice and given himself to it.

If being a saint means living in and out of God's love as the primary motivation of our lives, then Joseph becomes for us a kind of model. God is present and working

within the fabric of human life to bring new life. God's presence is within the circumstances of our lives, not outside of them. It is in the situations and circumstances we face that we are to perceive something deeper at work, a deeper meaning and purpose to things. Joseph's first response may be like ours when faced with difficult situations. We try to make the best of them, to be as compassionate and loving as we can, but we may see them as predicaments that we need to escape or just get through with as little damage or hurt as possible. We may be living out of the mindset that God's working has only to do with things that are good and pleasant, that have the feel of success or achievement.

However, the story leads us to another level of awareness. How is God present in this situation, this crisis, this difficult thing that we are facing? What might this situation be teaching us about ourselves, God, or life? Coming to such deeper awareness and perception calls for a deeper listening. That is what Joseph's dream is about. In scripture, God is always speaking to people in their dreams. Dreams have to do with our deeper consciousness, our deeper awareness. Maybe the story reminds us to pay more attention to our dreams. Or maybe dreams simply stand for that inner awareness of which we are all capable, listening to the inner voice of God.

This is why silence and contemplation are so important for our inward journeys. When we cultivate our ability to quiet our minds and emotions, to become inwardly silent, we discover and develop that ability to hear God's voice, to listen for deeper meanings. We no longer run from the situations that are confronting us, but stop and listen to what God may be saying to us in them. Instead of just reacting to everything that is going on, being ruled by the emotions stirred up in us, we stop, quiet ourselves, and simply listen inwardly. Then we are able to respond to things not just in order to fix them or to get through them with as little suffering as possible, but out of a clearer sense of what God is doing and how God is calling us to be part of it. We get beyond ourselves so that we can participate in God's bringing of new life out of situations that seem to hold only death.

This is why it is so important that we continue to grow as a community of prayer, committed to the inward journey. It is hard to learn and grow in this capacity for inner listening, for giving attention to God's speaking to us at that deeper level of life. Our society works against it. We need to help each other. We need to practice together. In Covenant Members meetings. In mission group meetings. In our worship together. We encourage and remind each other to stop, quiet ourselves, and inwardly listen. This leads us to better and fuller insights, perceiving what God is doing and saying to us in each situation, each decision, each opportunity we face.

Ida Scudder was a young American girl reluctantly visiting her father, John Scudder, at his missionary post in southern India in the late 1800s. She was asked one night to assist three poor women with their difficult childbirths. Custom prevented the husbands from letting a male doctor attend their wives. Ida had no training and could