

I believe it was last year but a couple of folks from this congregation travelled on vacation to New Mexico and visited the Loretto Chapel. Now I have to admit that I did not know anything about the Loretto Chapel when Foster told me about his trip to visit this place.

The history of the Loretto Chapel began when Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy was appointed by the Roman Catholic Church to the New Mexico Territory in 1850. Bishop Lamy, seeking to spread the faith and bring an educational system to this new territory, began a letter writing plea for priests, brothers and nuns to preach and teach. The first acceptance of his general plea was from the Sisters of Loretto.

In 1852 the Sisters of Loretto responded to Lamy's pleas by sending seven sisters who agreed to make this arduous journey to Santa Fe. Their trek was through St. Louis, then up the river to Independence, Mo. This small group was beset by a cholera epidemic, the Mother Superior died, and another nun was too ill to continue the journey and returned to Kentucky.

The Sisters arrived in Santa Fe in 1852 and opened Loretto School in 1853. The school was started and grew from very small beginnings to a school of around 300 students, despite the challenges of the territory including smallpox, tuberculosis, leaky mud roofs and even a brush with the rowdy Confederate Texans during the Civil War.

The sisters asked for a chapel to be built and Bishop Lamy agreed. He brought in two famous architects from Paris, France to Santa Fe to design and build the chapel. The sisters pooled their own inheritances to raise the \$30,000 required to build this beautiful Gothic chapel.

When the Loretto Chapel was completed in 1878, these famous builders made a terrible mistake. They built a balcony with no way to access it. This balcony was to be the choir loft but at twenty-two feet above it was impossible to reach. Carpenters were called in to address the problem, but they all concluded access to the loft would have to be via ladder as a staircase would interfere with the interior space of the small Chapel.

So these sisters were told they had a major problem with no viable solution.

Joseph in our story today faced a similar problem with no solution. We read this morning from Matthew's gospel. When we read Matthew's gospel, we get to hear Joseph's side of the story. If we read Luke's version, we get Mary's side of the story. If we read Mark or John, we read nothing about the birth of Jesus.

So here in Matthew we read of Joseph finding out that before he lives with Mary that she becomes pregnant. Can you imagine the betrayal he must have felt? His fiancé chose to be unfaithful to him right before their marriage?

In the patriarchal society where Mary and Joseph lived, if a woman became pregnant outside of marriage then the punishment was death. Mary would be stoned to death. So as Joseph sees it, there are two options that he can choose. He can divorce Mary publicly or he could divorce Mary privately. Being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, Joseph plans to quietly divorce Mary.

But just when he resolves to divorce Mary privately, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and informs him that neither of these options is the option that God wants. Instead, this angel comforts Joseph and tells him to not be afraid. The angel tells him to marry Mary for the child within her is from the Holy Spirit. He is to be named Jesus and he will save the people from their sins. This was nowhere on Joseph or Mary's radar screen of possible solutions.

So many times we are confronted with challenges and we think there are only negative solutions. We become anxious and conclude that the only solutions are the ones that we see in front of us. We become anxious and think that we either have to do this or we have to do that.

But when we turn over our challenges to God and submit to God's will, we may discover a still small whisper from God that moves us into a different direction than we could ever imagine. So what did these nuns in New Mexico do? They prayed for a different option than what they were presented. And an amazing thing happened.

The Sisters of the Chapel made their prayers through St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters and the earthly father of Jesus. On the ninth and final day of prayer, a man appeared at the Chapel with a donkey and a toolbox looking for work. Months later, the man completed an elegant circular staircase and then disappeared without pay or thanks. After searching for the man including an ad in the local newspaper and finding no trace of him, some concluded that he was St. Joseph himself, having come as an answer to the sisters' prayers.

The stairway's carpenter, whoever he was, built a magnificent structure. The design was innovative for the time and some of the design considerations still perplex experts today. The staircase has two 360 degree turns and no visible means of support, no nails, and was built with a type of wood that cannot be identified.

Maybe you are facing a challenge in your life right now and you feel you are being presented with a limited set of options and none of them are very good. Maybe you are facing a challenge in your family right now. Do I leave my spouse or do I stay with them? Maybe you are facing a challenge in your business right now. Do I shut it down or do I continue to operate in the red? Do I have the surgery right now or not? Do we move or stay put?

Tonight the church Session meets and we are looking at a very serious budget challenge for 2011. What are our options as a Session and congregation when it appears income to the church for 2011 will be much lower than 2010?

When we get into these anxious times, our ability to listen and discern is diminished. We think that there are only a limited set of options.

But I wonder if these 5 nuns and the story of the birth of Jesus have something to teach us? If we are anxious about a challenge or problem in front of us, maybe we need to set aside a solution and take our time to pray and listen. Maybe there is another solution that God is yearning for us to follow if we could just be quiet long enough to hear what God is saying to us.

The angel tells Joseph that what is about to take place is to fulfill the prophecy that a child shall be born and he is to be called Emmanuel. Emmanuel means "God is with us."

If we sit and listen and try not to solve too quickly, we may find out that God is with us as well. AMEN.

-Info on Loretto Chapel from <http://www.lorettochapel.com/staircase.html>

-Sermon was assisted by the reflections of McKenzie, Alyce, "The Advent Betrayal: A study of Matthew 1:18-25" and found at
"http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Fear-of-Betrayal.html"

-Text: Matthew 1: 18-25

-Given: December 19, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)