In the second half of the eighth century B.C. Isaiah received a call to prophetic office in the Temple of Jerusalem. This divine summons, to be the ambassador of the Most High, happened during a critical time in world history. The geographic setting for today’s story encompasses what are today, Israel, Syria, and Iraq. Geography, however, is not the only parallel we can draw between ancient times and the present day. As in the time of Isaiah, this is an area of much conflict and war. Our story opens with King Ahaz aligning himself with Assyria rather than joining forces with his natural allies as a people descended from Jacob (Israel and Damascus). By his misplaced loyalty, he held onto his throne in Judah with all its power, prestige, and privilege that kingship affords. Isaiah protests Ahaz’s choice to place his trust in Assyria, rather than trusting in the God of Jacob.

Besides preserving his position, throughout his 20-year reign, Ahaz was also freed of troubles with his ‘brother states’, a relationship that had been marred by territorial disputes. The downside of Ahaz’s pragmatic choice of allies was that Judah became a vassal state of Assyria. This lopsided alliance led to a moral breakdown of King Ahaz and the subjects of Judah, who subsequently embraced both the Assyrian religion, and its politics of aggression. If you think this is beginning to sound like the geopolitics of today you may be correct. I am referring to
foreign policy, in which superpowers use the smaller nations in this region as pawns in promoting their global ambitions. I pray that we, as one nation under God, can mend our ways, and always seek long-term peace, rather than trying to satisfy short-term gains.

In the midst of this unhealthy alliance, the Lord offers a sign to buoy Ahaz’s trust, but Ahaz refuses on the grounds that this would be tantamount to tempting God. Isaiah protests Ahaz’s hypocrisy, and his lust for power: Isaiah foretells that the Lord will provide a sign anyway. The sign will be the Virgin birth of a boy child who will be a true Shepherd of Israel. This descendant of King David will be a servant-leader that comes to proclaim the truth by his own life. King Ahaz, an unrighteous man, seeks to satisfy his own vain desire of power and privilege, by aligning himself with the rich and powerful.

St. Joseph in our Gospel from Matthew provides a stark contrast to King Ahaz. Joseph is a righteous man who does not seek to satisfy his own ambitions, but rather seeks to provide for and protect his family. Joseph is like the man described in today’s psalm, “One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean, who desires not what is vain.” (Psalm 24:4) However, when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant before they live together he decides to divorce her quietly, so that she will not be subject to the Law that requires that a woman caught in adultery be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). The Lord sends an angel to Joseph in a dream that instructs him that it is the Lord’s will that he take Mary as his wife. Joseph, unlike Ahaz, listens to the angel and places his trust in the promise proclaimed by Isaiah 800 years earlier. (Romans 1:2) Joseph, like Mary, accepts the calling to parent the son of Mary – Son of God. He did not seek after his own needs, but provided for the needs of others, even a Son that he did not father.

This makes Joseph a model for all fathers, and sets the bar high for any parent who desires to live ones faith. What kind of man takes on this huge responsibility on faith alone? What was he like? There is not a single word spoken by Joseph that is recorded in the scriptures. Neither does the Bible reveal much detail about Joseph’s role as Jesus’ earthly father, but we know from Matthew, today, that he was an excellent earthly example of integrity and righteousness. Joseph is last mentioned in Scripture when Jesus was 12 years old. We know that he passed on the carpentry trade to his son and raised him in the Jewish traditions and spiritual observances. My speculation (and there are no Bible references for this) that Jesus would share many of Joseph’s human qualities, while at the same time, without any comprise, share the distinct qualities of his Heavenly Father. I pray that our families can accept the responsibility and grace we need to be holy families.