

Sunday December 18th 4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah is depicted in the midst of social unrest that had befallen Judah between 735 and 733 BCE. The direct communication with king Ahaz in chapter 7 of Isaiah, to a more indirect communication as Isaiah speaks to the king's and people's lack of response to the prophet's message. In this morning's reading Isaiah is making an effort to convince frightened king Ahaz, by offering any confirming sign, of the prophecy, that Ahaz can imagine. Attempting to conceal his unwillingness to obey any prophetic words, Ahaz declines in a gesture of false piety. Isaiah responds with a judgement claiming that Syria and the northern kingdom will cease to exist and a similar disaster will befall Judah. The time of this destruction is tied to the birth and early childhood of a boy named Emmanuel.

Isaiah 7: 10-16

¹⁰God spoke again to Ahaz. This time he said, ¹¹“Ask for a sign from your God. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!”

¹²But Ahaz said, “I’d never do that. I’d never make demands like that on God!”

¹³So Isaiah told him, “Then listen to this, government of David! It’s bad enough that you make people tired with your pious, timid hypocrisies, but now you’re making God tired. ¹⁴So the Master is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She’ll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us). ¹⁵By the time the child is twelve years old, able to make moral decisions, ¹⁶the threat of war will be over. Relax, those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture.

Annunciation stories form a regular literary genre in the Bible. They serve not to record historical fact, but to interpret the role a child is destined to play in salvation history and emphasizes that this role is initiated by God. The appearance of an angel and the announcement of the child's future destiny form the core of the genre. Usually there is some impediment to the birth such as sterility and/or old age. The situation in today's reading is that Mary has become pregnant between her betrothal and the consummation of the marriage, with the apparent suggestion of illegitimacy. In this reading, the angel also serves the further purpose of inducing Joseph to adopt Jesus as his son, so that the child would become a son of David. To the ancient world there would be no inconsistency here, for adoption provided one with ancestors just as if one were of biological descent.

Matthew 1: 18-25

¹⁸The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by

the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.)¹⁹ Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

²⁰While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant."²¹She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins."²²This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term:

²³Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; They will name him Emmanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").

²⁴Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary.²⁵But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – "Do we really believe?"

How many of us have heard the old line "**a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.**" So who wrote this line? This line is actually from William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* and when this line is uttered Juliet seems to be arguing that it doesn't matter that Romeo is from rival house of Montague, what matters is who Romeo is. This reference is often used to imply that the names of things do not affect what they really are. And yet I think in many ways one's identity is really and truly tied up in our names. If I asked you who you were, your first response would most likely be your name. There once was a time when a baptism or dedication actually included a naming portion, because when one was to be baptized they were named which became that important part of their identity as a person of God. And yet truly, what is in a name?

How many of you have seen the sister act movies? Whoopi Goldberg stars as the Reno showgirl Dolores, when she runs into trouble with her mobster boyfriend she has to go into hiding and she becomes Sister Mary Clarence. For those of you that know the movie you will remember that this change in name, and subsequent identity, make for some very interesting events in the rather closed off convent that Sister Mary Clarence is sent to, as a safe place to hide. While we watch the movie we can ask ourselves who is she? Is she Dolores, is she Sister Mary Clarence, is there really a difference and does it matter?

This is actually where we find ourselves with our readings this morning. This reading from Isaiah is a typical Christmas reading where the prophet is speaking of the coming of God into the world, the coming of Emmanuel, "God with us." In the Reading Isaiah is speaking to King Ahaz, who was refusing to even listen to Isaiah's prophecies, Isaiah was telling him that the current way of false piety and hypocrisy was going to come to an end, there would be a new king and this king would change everything. In reading from Matthew this morning we read much the same story about the coming of God into the world but with the little twist. To truly understand the reading from Matthew we might need to have a little more information about what the

world might have been like for those in the first century. You see in the ancient world marriage was actually a process. The first part of the process was for a couple and to be betrothed to each other, I suppose we could think about this much like being promised to each other but a little more rigid. Once a couple is betrothed the only way for them not to continue with this process would be for them to get a divorce because technically, although they were not living together, they were considered to already be married. The second part of this process then becomes the formal religious part of the marriage after which the couple would live together and consummate the marriage. The reading from Matthew this morning takes place right in the middle of this process.

Mary and Joseph have been betrothed to each other but they have not yet begun to live together or have consummated their union. And this is where we find Joseph struggling with the fact that Mary is to have a baby.

So I would like to share a story with you about when her youngest son was born. He was born just after midnight on a Sunday morning and shortly after his birth his mother and I had a conversation about what we were going to name this little one. After much conversation we decided to give him the middle name of Johann, after his Opa on his mother side. That day after I had gone home and had some sleep Opa phoned to see how the baby and his mother were doing. When I told him the name that we have chosen he was actually quite surprised and shocked and kept asking if we were sure that we wanted to name the baby after him, his great grandfather. I assured him that this was a decision that we have both made willingly and we're honoured to have our little one named after his great grandfather. This was a decision that we have made. But what would happen if someone who was writing about this birth were to all of a sudden put down that "and so fulfilling the prediction that was once made by the pregnant woman's father the baby would have a middle name of George." The question we would all have is what name is it Johann or George? And if it ends up being Johann, what does George have to do with anything?

This is where we find ourselves with this morning's reading from Matthew. Joseph's plans to quietly dismiss Mary, in other words divorce her privately, are derailed by the appearance of an angel in Joseph's dream. The Angel tells Joseph that Mary is to have a son, given to her by God, and that they are to name the baby Jesus. Then a short while later in the reading the narrator states, "they will name him Emmanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us.") And yet when the baby is born they name him Jesus. Let's be honest it would be perfectly reasonable to think that maybe Joseph was just a little bit stressed about what was happening in his life. First he finds a woman and they become betrothed but shortly thereafter he finds out that she is pregnant and he's not the father. On top of this we have Joseph being visited by an angel who tells him that it is okay that he's still to marry Mary. Now if we remember what else was happening at this time in the ancient world, the Emperor had called for a census of the known world and each person was to return to their family home to be included in the census. So Joseph newly betrothed, with a pregnant wife, carrying a child that was not his, having to travel all the way to Bethlehem, if I were Joseph I would be putting my hands up in the air and just going "seriously." And so we have a story of a baby that has two names the name of Jesus and the name Emmanuel and which one was it, was it Jesus, was it Emmanuel, or does it really matter.

You see in fact we have come to equate them as the same Emmanuel-god with us. Jesus-Emmanuel. Jesus-God with us. Because in reality it doesn't matter the only thing that matters is that we truly believe that God is with us.

Throughout Advent we have been journeying with the three men who came from the east searching, following that star in the sky. And so we have talked about the hope they must've felt as they left, we have talked about their search, their faith to follow the star, not really knowing where it would lead them, and yet throughout it all, they believed that they heading toward something that would change the world.

This advent season we are called, we're challenged, to truly believe in "God with us." We are to believe that God is with us in all of our flesh and blood realities and messiness. God is with us in all that we do and in all that we are. **Teresa of Avila stated that we see, "Christ among the pots and pans," Scott Hoezee, President of the Center for Excellence in Preaching states, "Christ among the barn animals then those quirky magi astrologers and then all of the rest of the Gospel's curious cast of characters."** We truly believe in Emanuel God with us, God with us in all of the ordinary times and days of our lives. Even in those times of struggle in our lives, those times when our children look us in the eye and tell us that they don't love us anymore . Or those times when the loved one who is suffering from dementia or Alzheimers asks again, "What is your name dear" Do we believe that God is with us? And if we believe that God is always with us, God is always looking into our eyes, searching us. And even in those times in our lives when we are so angry with God that we refuse to look to God, God never looks away from us. This advent season we have journeyed with those from the east hoping, searching following, and today as the birth of love incarnate draws near we must ask ourselves do we truly believe in "God with us", in times of joy and celebration and in times of sorrow and anguish. And so I leave you with one final question this advent season, Will you truly believe?