

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

* "Participating in God's Plan," by The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue[1], adapted by The Rev. Nat Johnson

When we think of the story of Jesus' birth, I suspect that many of us likely imagine scenes from Luke's Gospel, with the angel's announcement to Mary, her and Joseph's trek to Bethlehem, a stable with a manger, and shepherds bearing witness to angelic choirs in the night sky. Matthew gives us a different perspective, pointing the spotlight at Joseph and the role he would play in the divine plan to bring healing and transformation to God's people and to the world.

We don't learn much about Joseph, except that he was a "righteous man." By this, Matthew suggests that Joseph was devoted to God and to God's law, dedicated to a life of holiness. In the Gospel according to James, an extracanonical writing from the 2nd-century, we get a fuller picture of what played out for Joseph as he discovered Mary's pregnancy: his was no docile acceptance. Like any human, Joseph would have found it difficult to believe Mary's story of her experience with the angel, assuming instead that she had been unfaithful. According to the Levitical code, Joseph really only had two options. He could force Mary into a very public and likely fatal trial through the religious courts, or he could divorce her quietly, leaving her without support for her and her expected child. As a righteous man, he chose the latter.

Just as he made his mind up to dismiss Mary, God intervenes by sending an angel to Joseph in a dream. To modern ears, particularly in our dominant culture, this sounds a bit outlandish. Things of angels and dreams and visions are not part of our usual repertoire of experiences and so we often chalk it up to a superstitious past. I wonder, though, if we can be a little too quick to dismiss the extraordinary (and perhaps even the mundane) because we haven't personally experienced such things.

After all, how many of us can say we have had a visitation from God, or even from one of God's messengers, in our sleep. More often, our experience of God's intervention in our lives is dependent upon a godly word from another human being, more like the experience of Mary when she goes to her cousin's home and Elizabeth's spirit-filled proclamation confirms what Mary had been told. But, I think it is also true that the Holy Spirit has a way of engaging our imaginations, enabling us to see a way of existing and engaging the world, a way to navigate the various crises of our lives.

"Neither Joseph, nor Mary (as Luke tells us), is forced to take part in God's plan. For both, there is consent, an acceptance of the invitation that God offers. Mary accepts the angel's words by proclaiming, "let it be with me according to your word." When Joseph wakes, he recognizes that he has encountered a messenger of God. As a righteous and devote man, he has tuned his ears and his heart to recognize the voice and will of God and so, as Matthew tells us, "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" and took Mary to be his wife, and when the child was born, he named the boy Jesus. God broke into human history to bring about the salvation of God's people and healing for the world. But God did so by enlisting regular, ordinary human beings.

Through the Incarnation, we see how God acts, even in the extraordinary case of the birth of Jesus. While God becoming human in Jesus is a once-in-all-history event, God does regularly prompt people like you and me to take part in God's hopes and dreams for our world. We are invited to participate in what God is doing through serving others, as though we are serving Jesus.

Jesus describes this in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, describing the actions of the faithful: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Those who cared for others will be surprised, not knowing that they cared for Jesus, who will then explain, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

This parable is all the more poignant when we see Jesus' humble origins. The King of Creation was not born in a palace to a life of luxury. Mary and Joseph are peasants, rural poor who cannot even afford the normal sacrifice as an offering for Jesus' birth. More than that, they become refugees, fleeing to the enemy nation of Egypt in order to escape the tyrannical and murderous plot of the puppet-king Herod, before finally returning to Israel and landing in the backwater town of Nazareth. Jesus will later serve others on the road where he is frequently a guest who relies on the hospitality of others, as a stranger welcomed by others. Jesus sees the needs around him everywhere among the members of his human family.

God will find a way to care for those in need, using someone else if we fail to respond. God will work out God's purposes through whoever is willing to listen to the promptings of their hearts. While you and I will not be invited to such a momentous task as Joseph, we no less can take part in what God is doing. Jesus makes it clear that small acts of providing food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty are of eternal significance. In these small yet meaningful ways, we get to participate in the coming Reign of God by being God's hands and feet in the world. This is part of how God breaks into human history, bringing divine plans to fruition through ordinary people."

I wonder, dear people of Grace, what divine visitations you've had this Advent season? How has God invited you to participate in the Incarnate life of Christ? As we journey these last days to our celebration of Jesus' birth, our eyes should be open anew to how God is giving us the opportunity to respond to a divine invitation. For in caring for those in need, we are serving Emmanuel, the God who is with us, in Jesus. When we show care for those who would otherwise be lost and left out, we are doing so for the one whose First Advent we celebrate, even as we await Jesus' coming again in glory.

May God give us grace to see and hear the messengers sent to us, to risk accepting God's invitation to participate in the coming of God's reign, and to live lives that invite others to see and do the same. Amen.

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