

Advent 4 – Year A

May the word of God be in our minds, on our lips, and in our hearts. Amen.

Two weeks ago, our gospel passage was about John the Baptist's proclamation to "Repent – for the kingdom of God is near." I talked about the word "repent" meaning to turn, to change our way of looking at things, and thus change the way we live. In today's scriptures, we have two more examples of what such "looking at things differently" might mean.

To give a little background to our reading from Isaiah, the northern and southern kingdoms of the Israelites were at war with one another; Israel was preparing to attack Jerusalem or the kingdom of Judah, and King Ahaz and his people in Jerusalem were sorely afraid. So Isaiah was sent by God to offer words of encouragement, telling Ahaz not to be afraid. And then we come to today's passage. God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign – in other words, God says to Ahaz, "tell me what you want me to do to show you that I am with you and you will be all right!" But Ahaz responds with, "NO – I will not put the Lord to the test." Now that response, on its face, seems to be a good one. Even Jesus, tempted in the desert by Satan, makes the same response, quoting one of the commands of the Torah: "Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test." - But in this case, *God* is speaking to Ahaz, and Ahaz's response is to hold onto his tradition, to hold onto the *rules he knows*, to keep looking at things the way he always has, instead of responding to the voice of God in that moment. What seems to be a pious response, Ahaz saying he will follow the law and *not* test God, is really an *unwillingness* to respond to the voice of God. But God, in this instance, will not be thwarted. God says there *will* be a sign: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." Immanuel – a Hebrew word meaning, "God with us."

And that takes us to today's gospel passage from Matthew, which might seem oddly placed here on this last Sunday of Advent, because it is essentially Matthew's Nativity story; it starts with the line, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way."

But what we really have here, I think, is *Joseph's* Annunciation. We are familiar with "the Annunciation" – which usually always refers to the angel appearing to Mary to tell her she will bear the Messiah, and her response of, "Be it done to me according to your will." - But this is *Joseph's* annunciation story. This is the story of *Joseph* being told about this child to be born.

Matthew tells us first that Joseph is a *righteous man* – which meant in Jewish culture that he would try always to follow the law, the way of God. He and Mary were engaged, legally committed to one another, but not yet living together. So when he discovers that Mary is pregnant, he realizes that – according to the law and his tradition – he has two choices. He can bring charges against Mary publicly – in which case she would most likely be stoned to death – or he can divorce Mary privately, by – in the presence of two witnesses – writing out a paper of divorce and giving it to her. Joseph had decided on the latter, the option of divorcing her quietly. You can almost imagine him, having come to that decision, finally being able to fall off to sleep – only to have *his* Annunciation experience. An angel in his dream tells him *not to be afraid*; that this child is of God, and that he should not divorce Mary, publicly OR privately. Notice that here again we have someone who knows what the law, the tradition says – and who is called by God to step outside that boundary. Ahaz said, "No, I will not..." But Joseph, Joseph woke from sleep and did what he heard God asking him to do.

Episcopal priest Suzanne Guthrie says:

"How did Joseph know to turn aside from righteousness as he knew it, to follow a dark, non-rational, alternative righteousness? Something in his life must have prepared him to pay attention to that particular dream that night: do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Such a statement can make perfect sense in the context of a dream. But not upon waking. What is more likely, really, that Mary experienced sexual relations (welcome or unwelcome) OR that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit? But the messenger in the dream sweetens the message with a scripture passage familiar to the dreamer: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us.""ⁱ

Joseph trusted the dream. He, like Mary, believed that the One who made the promise was worthy of trust. And he, like Mary, committed himself to the reality of Immanuel – God with us.

God said to Ahaz and to Joseph and to Mary – and to us – Do not be afraid. The angel greeted Mary with the words, “The Lord is with you!” and to Ahaz and Joseph and us, we have the sign of Immanuel – GOD WITH us.

But to hear the message – the words that God speaks consistently; to hear God saying “Do not be afraid, I am with you,” we have to have our ears and eyes and hearts open.

What today’s gospel – Joseph’s *Annunciation* story – may be telling us more than anything is that Mary is not the only one to whom God announces the Incarnation. God speaks to each of us. It might be in a dream, or through the words of a friend, or a particularly beautiful sunset. It might even be in some lonely darkness. But God speaks. Be not afraid. I am with you.

May God open our eyes, and ears, and hearts to know it. Amen.

- [Isaiah 7:10-16](#)
- [Romans 1:1-7](#)
- [Matthew 1:18-25](#)
- [Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18](#)

ⁱ Suzanne Guthrie. <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/advent4a.html>