

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Saint Teresa of Avila the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, once wrote “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the earth; yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.” Once, Jesus was born on Earth. He took on human flesh, and lived as we live. He suffered and died for us, leaving us with his Holy Spirit to guide us. But even before this miracle, God used ordinary people to work out God’s purpose. God invited regular folks to participate in the unfolding of the Divine plan. We see this again and again, as we look at God’s action, both in the past, and the present. From Abraham and Sarah making a covenant with God, to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, to Mary Magdalene, who was a witness to the Resurrection, and sent as the “apostle to the apostles” with the Good News, we see God working through ordinary people.

In our Gospel reading today, we see Joseph being offered the opportunity to play a critical role in history. When he learns that Mary is pregnant, he knows that the baby is not his. As Mary’s fiancé he is almost as good as married to her, and dissolving that bond would require a decree of divorce that is officially acknowledged by three other men. Certainly, in this situation, he is within his rights to cancel the betrothal, and even to make a scene about it. But, being a very decent person, Joseph doesn’t want to make a scene. He just wants to quietly be separated from Mary, which he resolves to do. However, God uses a dream to get Joseph’s attention. In the ancient world, and in many traditional societies today, dreams were considered to be important, and often helpful in making decisions. Actually, Carl Jung thought that dreams are a time when our ego is out of the way, and God can actually get a word in edgewise, but that is a sermon for another day. So Joseph learns from an angel that Mary’s baby is from the Holy Spirit, and that he shouldn’t divorce her. Not only that, but “you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Can you imagine what Joseph thought when he woke up? I mean, how many directive dreams do you imagine that he had even had in the past? Even if he was in the habit of receiving messages from angels, this one would have been astounding. “My fiancée is pregnant with a child of the Holy Spirit? Mary is going to have God’s son?” Matthew makes it sound like Joseph’s decision was simple: “when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him,” but Joseph had to have been struck with the enormity of his responsibility. After all, he was just a carpenter—nobody of importance—but he chose to accept this task. And that is key. God gives us *choices*. The angel didn’t say, “don’t you dare divorce Mary!” He said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Joseph had a choice, and he made the right one. As did Mary—remember that when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, she says, “let it be with me according to your word.” If she had said, “you know, I’m getting married soon, and I don’t really think I want to take that on,” God would probably have chosen someone else.

For most of us, visitations from angels, prophetic dreams, and visions are the exception, rather than the rule. But God still uses messengers to get our attention, even today. Today, instead of visions, God often uses other people to help us see what God is doing in our lives. As Saint Teresa says, “Christ has no body now on earth but (y)ours.” How often have you had someone tell you about something that you had just been thinking about? For instance, how often have you had someone on your mind, and then you see them, or get a call or text from them? Doesn’t it sometimes happen that you are trying to decide something, and then you get an answer from, or by some person? This synchronicity is not an accident. If we just allow ourselves to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will experience this more and more often.

A couple of years ago I visited a woman from New England who was nearing the end of her life in our hospital. She couldn’t really speak anymore, so her husband explained to me that she wanted prayer. “Actually, she would really want an Episcopal priest, but I don’t suppose there’s one available,” he said. When I told him that I was an Episcopal priest, he was amazed, but asked if I could do a sort of Last Rites for his wife. So together we said the Ministration at the Time of Death from the Book of Common Prayer, and I anointed his wife. I was so grateful that God put me in this situation, but because this couple lived so far away, I never expected to see them again. However, this past summer, a friend of mine who lives at Westminster-Canterbury told me about a

new resident there. This gentleman had described how the chaplain at the hospital had given his wife last rites, and how he wished he had gotten her name. This gentleman still had his wife's ashes, and wanted to have them buried locally, by that chaplain. "I think that chaplain was you, wasn't it?" my friend asked. "Can I give him your number?"

And so we did bury this gentleman's wife, with the help of their children and grandchildren. Synchronicity.

We are not all going to be called to change the course of divine history, as Joseph and Mary were. But we are all called to help play our part in it. We can be open to the idea that God might call on us for something. A small thing—or a big thing. We can accept that the Holy Spirit is always with us, and will guide us if we say "yes."

Amen.

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