

Bible Study
Advent 4, Year A
December 18, 2016

[RCL] Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah 7:10–16

During this season of Advent, it is easy to read the prophet Isaiah and immediately jump to the birth of Jesus. Isaiah is directly quoted in Matthew’s gospel, which we also read today: *Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.* While it is not wrong for us to understand who Jesus is in light of this text, we must also recognize that the prophet Isaiah was not predicting a future when Mary would give birth to God incarnate. Isaiah’s project is one that is much more immediate and much more involved.

If you read the fullness of Isaiah’s text beginning at 7:1, you see that the prophet is arguing with King Ahaz who has allied himself with the Assyrian empire. At this time in history, the Jewish people were split between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. As the Assyrian empire expanded, Isaiah was sent by the northern kingdom to call Judah into alliance with Israel against a common enemy. When King Ahaz refuses, Isaiah says that a child—an innocent—will come with a name that means “God with us,” but that child will see the destruction and ruin of Judah.

Isaiah’s prophecy is about how even in the face of atrocities, God is with us. Jesus, who came in love to reconcile humanity to God and one another, is one way we see that prophecy come about, but it was certainly not what Isaiah or Ahaz expected.

- What ideas or issues split us as people of God today?
- How does our story as told in scripture lead us to reconcile those differences?
- Is there an Advent practice that could help foster reconciliation and love in our church/community/world?

Psalm 80:1–7, 16–18

*Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.*

This refrain is repeated in Psalm 80 in verses 2, 7, and 18. It is the cry the psalmist makes on behalf of the people of Israel that shapes the arc of the psalm. The people in darkness and despair cry out for God to bring light into the world. Although our Prayer Book translation of the psalm is beautiful, it does not always capture the subtleties of the Hebrew. In Hebrew, each repetition of this prayer builds upon the last.

- v.3 - Restore us *O God* (elohim)
- v.7 - Restore us *O God of Hosts* (elohim tseva’oth)
- v. 18 - Restore us *O Yahweh, God of Hosts* (yahweh elohim tseva’oth)

Try not to get too bogged down in the Hebrew, but do notice that with each cry for help, the psalmist grows in knowledge of God and who God is. The cry moves from the generic word for god to a specific god, God of Hosts, to an actual naming of God, Yahweh, God of Hosts.

Also telling in this prayer is that the psalmist asks for the light of God's countenance - light from the face of God. We know from Exodus 33:20 that no one can see God's face and live. That is the gift of Jesus - a God whom we can name, know, and look in the face comes into the world to spread light and life.

- Where in this world do you see the face of God?
- What words or modifiers would you use to describe God as you have known God?
- What prayer would you write for your church/community/self to pray every day this final week of Advent?

Romans 1:1–7

If we break up into parts this opening greeting from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul basically does three things: he identifies himself as a servant of Jesus, he identifies who Jesus is, and he offers greetings and blessings to Jesus' people in Rome. It is a passage full of statements of identity—who Paul is, who Jesus is, and who we, the church, are.

Paul first talks about himself in relationship to Jesus. He is a servant of Jesus, he is called by Jesus to be an apostle, and he is set apart for the gospel, or good news, of Jesus. Paul's identity is completely wrapped up in his relationship to Jesus. In verse 6, that identity is shared with the people in Rome who are also "called to belong to Jesus Christ."

Sandwiched between these two statements of identity is a rich statement of who Jesus is. Jesus is described as "descended from David," "flesh," "Son of God," "resurrected," and "Lord." Even Jesus' interactions with us are laid out: Jesus gives us grace, establishes our faith, and brings in the Gentiles.

Paul, Jesus, the church in Rome, and even we who are followers of Jesus today are all enmeshed together in God's creation. Paul is establishing in this salutation that all of us are connected to one another and to God in the person of Jesus.

- What is your relationship to Jesus? How do you express that?
- How do you talk to others about the good news of Jesus? Or do you?
- How can we as a church and as individuals better live into our identity as followers of Jesus?

Matthew 1:18–25

In this passage from Matthew's gospel, names and relationships are very important. Just prior to this passage, Matthew gives a detailed genealogy that links Jesus to David, the great king of Israel, by naming all of Joseph's ancestors. Jesus' mother Mary and father Joseph are named, and the love Joseph has for Mary is revealed when he is unwilling to publically disgrace her for

being pregnant. When the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, the angel calls Joseph by name and notes his lineage from David and his relationship with Mary. Furthermore, the angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus which means “God saves.” Even in Matthew’s commentary after the story, he recalls the prophecy from Isaiah who speaks of a child who will be named Emmanuel which means “God with us.”

Names mean something here. When we love someone or know someone well, we call them by their name, and our relationship is strengthened. Names also sometimes carry their own meaning. According to Jewish practice, Yahweh, God’s name, is not spoken in order to give it a sense of holiness. When God became one of us, however, he receives a rather common name, Jesus, which is a shortened version of the Hebrew name Joshua. The fact that Jesus has such a normal name and yet it means something tremendous - “God saves” - tells us something about God and how God interacts with us in this world.

Note all the contradictions in this story. Joseph is a simple man, yet descended from King David. Mary is in a situation that could ruin her socially, yet Joseph loves her and she bears the son of God. Jesus is given a simple, common name, yet it lays out God’s plan of salvation for the world. Matthew points out the greatness of this name and this plan through recalling the prophecy of Isaiah where a child will be called Emmanuel - God with us. It is a reminder to look for God’s presence in one another because God is with us in the common and everyday.

- What names or titles would you give God?
- Have you ever found God in unexpected or common places?
- What does your name tell about your story?

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