



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 4 Year A

A Daring Plan

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

It was a daring plan. For eons, God had tried to get the attention of people. Through prophets, poets, and priests, God had tried to get the attention of the people God loved. God had yelled and whispered, stayed silent and shouted, but people were deaf to God's call. God appeared in dreams and burning bushes, spoke through pillars of fire and fine manna from heaven, provided water in the wilderness and lands flowing with milk and honey, and still, the people wouldn't listen. It was a language barrier, God thought. "They can't hear me."

So, God spoke louder and bolder.

Fiery prophets and judges and kings spoke with God's voice. They tried their best to call the people back to the love buried deep inside, but the words fell on deaf ears. Humanity thought they were "self-made" and so they ignored the messengers and the message. They created idols of wealth and greed and worshiped on the mountains of commerce an idol called Fear. Fear preached a gospel of scarcity, me first, and self-centeredness. The people were divided one from another and surrounded themselves with others who looked and thought and talked alike and God's heart broke. "They were made for love," God said.

So, God hatched a daring plan. Instead of poets and prophets, instead of manna and messengers, instead of fires and floods, God would become flesh and blood. The creator of the universe, the One who called the cosmos into being with a word, the great I Am would take human flesh. But how?

A baby. Babies by their very presence inspire hope for the future. But God as a baby had to be special. Not the baby of a powerful queen or a savvy politician, but a helpless baby, born in a backwater town. God was going to become a nobody. "I will be Immanuel – 'God with us' – to show them the face of love." But what if things go wrong? What if something happened to God as a helpless little child? That was the chance that Love was going to have to take.

God was ready, but it took a while and a bit of searching before the angel finally found a girl named Mary that said yes. Perhaps others politely passed or simply shooed the messenger away, but Mary, Mary said

yes. But the messenger had forgotten about Joseph. Maybe Mary could convince him. After all, who doesn't like a baby?

Scandalous!

How could Mary be pregnant? We just got engaged. We haven't even gone to see the rabbi or even asked for our parents' blessing. Imagine what her mother will think or what she might do. Imagine what my mother will say. They tried to warn me that she was headstrong, but I never expected this. How could she? Didn't she think I would find out? She's ruined. My reputation is ruined, but I don't want her to be stoned to death. No one should ever have to go through that. Maybe it would be best if I just quietly let her go. I'll sleep on it.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'”

But why her? Why me? Why here? We are poor and simple and powerless. Why would God choose to be born here? It doesn't make sense. I don't want to be responsible for raising God. What happens if we mess this up? How do you ground the creator of the cosmos?

God is with us.

The time had come for the baby to be born. All those eons of loving and longing and hoping came together in this one seemingly insignificant moment. At last, God could speak our language. In Jesus, we are reminded that throughout the lives of our ancestors, throughout our lives and even in the lives of those yet to come, God is with us. God was with us when times were tough, when the weight of the world seemed heavy on our shoulders. God was with us when the whip of bondage weighed heavy on the backs of the people of God and freedom was a dream.

Emmanuel. God is with us.

God is with us through the struggle and the storm. God is with us in our stumbling and shortcomings, in triumphs and our thanksgiving, in the midst of the messiness of our lives and the days we seem to barely hold it together. God is with us.

God will be with us, as we travel into the unknown, as we venture on deeper water and uncharted paths. God will be with us in the silence and in the shouts, in our liberation and our longing. In Jesus, God was, God is, and God will be with us. Always.

The thing is, we, as the people of God and the followers of Jesus, forget that all our lives, our loves, and our longings are caught up in a God who became flesh and blood and bone and body to be with us. Ours is not a deity that is far off, removed from humanity; instead, ours is a God whose hands dug into the rich fertile ground and was able to say, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground...” Ours is a God who knew hunger and longing and hard work. “God is with us” is both pledge and promise that no matter where we find ourselves in this life, even in death and beyond death, that we are never, ever, ever alone!

Our world longs to see God with us. Behind the fear, the divisions, the divides we long to connect with the divine, to look for the holy in the midst of the confusion. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be grounded in the truth that God’s love is more than enough to cast out our fear. We know that God comes to us again and again seeking, searching, and sowing love. To know, to truly know, and to rest in that holy knowing, is to recognize that in Jesus Christ, God is in charge, and no matter how much we try to cling to the past, no matter how much we long for what has been, God is always pointing to the future. When we get out of our own way, when we stop worrying about buildings and budgets, pews and pledges, the real work of walking with God in the world begins. The sacred and often scary work of clothing the poor, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the foreigner, honoring the immigrant, and blessing the other is why we follow Jesus. Maybe we should start loving (and living) like we believe it.

The birth of Jesus is not an event in time that took place millennia ago. The birth of Jesus the Messiah happens again and again and again each day in our world if we stop long enough to recognize God with us. God coming into our world will always be scandalous because it means that any of us could be in the presence of God made flesh. Listen. Can you hear it? Off in the distance. It’s the sound of a newborn baby’s cry. Amen.

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