



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 4 (A)

Participating in God's Plan

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

God breaks into human history bringing divine plans to fruition through ordinary people. We see this pattern all through scripture, from the patriarch Abraham to the persecutor of Christians, Saul, who becomes the Apostle Paul. And from Deborah and Esther, who bring hope to their people, to Mary Magdalene, who was a witness to the Resurrection sent as the “apostle to the apostles” with the Good News.

This pattern of God working through people is no less true in the most important divine plan in history, as the Word became flesh in Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. God used Mary and Joseph in a plan to turn the world upside-down, which was really setting everything right once more, in Jesus. Knowing them as St. Mary and St. Joseph can hide the fact that, though this couple was amazing, unique in all history even, they were also very much human.

In our Gospel reading, we see that Joseph is a person with hopes and dreams for his own life, who found himself taking this critical role in history. When we meet Joseph, he is engaged to Mary and learns that she is pregnant. God uses a dream to get Joseph's attention. Joseph hearing from an angel in his sleep is not so different from what you and I can experience. Sure, we can sometimes have dreams that get our attention, but we can also find the Holy Spirit breaking into our imagination. More often, God uses messengers to get our attention, like Mary's relative Elizabeth, who confirmed what Mary had already heard from the angel. God often uses other people to assist us in seeing what God is doing in our lives. A godly friend can be very important as we test out whether our great idea is something the Holy Spirit is prompting us to do.

God does not make anyone act but rather invites us to take part in what God is doing in the world. In Luke's Gospel, we read of how the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, with Mary later responding, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Here in Matthew's Gospel, we find Joseph wanting to do the right thing. Breaking an engagement took a divorce decree, and divorce had to be requested by either party and witnessed by three others to be legal, so it was not as easy a matter as it might be today to end an engagement. Joseph wants to handle this in a way that would not harm Mary. Then an angel comes to Joseph in a dream, saying, “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.”

Joseph believes the dream and Matthew tells us, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.” Joseph accepted the invitation to participate in God’s plan of salvation, just as Mary had already done.

So, Joseph marries Mary. She has a child whom Joseph names Jesus, which means “God saves.” God will save and God will do it through Jesus, but Mary and Joseph were essential to the plan. Mary had to consent to the pregnancy and Joseph to the marriage.

God rarely acts in history with this sort of intervention. Jesus will anger a hometown crowd with this assertion years later, saying, “The truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

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. After Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph will take him to the Temple to offer two turtledoves; the Torah required a lamb together with either a turtledove or a pigeon to be offered for the birth of a son or daughter. However, Leviticus 12:8 noted that poor families could offer two birds instead, as a lamb would present a financial hardship. The Holy Family qualifies for what amounts to a hardship discount. 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.

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 the 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.

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