

Companions on the Way



Advent Worship Resources

Daily Reflections: Week 4



Ready or not

Day One: Read Isaiah 7:10-16

Emmanuel, God is with us, is one of my favourite titles for Jesus and given the number of beautiful timeless hymns it is a title that has deeply resonated with the people of faith for a very long time.

For many of us I suspect we hear “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.” Those words and that haunting melody that captures the longing for the coming of God in such a way that we can sing the final verse “O come, O dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death’s dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.” with great hope in the face of whatever darkness that is threatening our world and life. (You can find either beautiful and conventional choir versions or a haunting version by the Piano Guys on You tube.)

Allow this hymn and the strange dark reading from Isaiah to stir the gloomy clouds of night and death’s dark shadows, to stir the longing for a new day, to stir the hope that in the advent of Jesus, who is God with us, we may find our new again life. Imagine and anticipate how the coming of Jesus into human life, and the coming of the Christ into our world now is and can be the dayspring of our life.

Note to preachers: this is a complex text set against the political machinations of the 8th century BCE and needs, in all fairness, to be understood in that context before being projected onto the

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birth of Jesus. I recommend Anthea Portier-Young's Commentary on Isaiah 7:10-16 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/.preaching.aspx?commentary_id=855

Day Two: Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Through much of the history of the chosen people there was this great longing for the intervention of God to restore to the people their homeland, their flourishing as a nation with political stability, peace and respect with neighbours, and with a rich life-giving economy that brought abundance to all. Into this hope Jesus was born at one of the low points in the chosen people's history. No wonder some of his followers would hope that he would step up into political worldly leadership. And we are inheritors of that longing, that desire for life to be restored to some past moment in which we apparently were a society in which we all flourished and lived abundantly. (Personally my read of history is that there was never such a time but there were times in history when there was a sense that incremental improvements were being made and that history was moving in the right direction at least. I don't think many feel that at the moment.)

There is also in this psalm a sense in which our present sufferings are a judgement upon us for our past unfaithfulness as a nation, a chosen people, and as individuals. Reflect on what you think and feel we as a western culture, a nation, a church, and individuals are doing or not doing that might bring judgement or block the flow of the spirit of God in our world.

And hear the psalmist's hope that there would be one, a son of man, upon whom the power of God would rest. We see that fulfilment in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. How does the anticipation of the remembering of his humble birth give us life, give your life?

Day Three: Read Romans 1:1-7

At first read this is disappointingly formal and a little 'abstract' in the lead up to the longed-for birth of the Christ child. I can only assume that the lectionary writers have included it because it demonstrates Paul understands that Jesus was born of the line of David according to the flesh. Paul is mainly interested in the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus but even Paul is

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convinced of the humanity of Jesus. And Paul is convinced that Jesus was and is the Son of God (which means in his context that Cesar is not!). Therefore what might appear to us as formal, and dare I say it – boring, is actually quite incendiary in its time and place.

Paul is making it clear on his business card, or his job description, that he serves the one who was truly human and the Son of God. Paul is declaring this in his letter to the Romans where those reading it will know that Paul is dangerously claiming that the Emperor of the Roman Empire is therefore Not the Son of God.

As we get ready to gather around the cradle and sing lullabies to the infant Jesus we need to keep this claim in the back of our mind and allow the vulnerability of the infant and the power of the divine one coming among us to be felt.

Day Four: Read Matthew 1:18-25

At last the story we have been waiting for, the birth of baby Jesus. After all the build up, all the hopes of Israel down through the ages, the longings of our own time, we come to the humble story of a man and a woman, a pregnancy and a birth, and a baby. God comes to be with us, to become one of us, in the usual way of creatures through birth.

It is both a birth like any birth and an amazing birth. It is worth reading the first 17 verses of Matthew with all the begetting that went into the family tree of Jesus. It is a reflection on God's gracious activity in the midst of very conflicted and haphazard human history. "The genealogy is unusual in citing women, non-Jews, and morally questionable characters among the ancestors." (Aaron M. Cale in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler editors of The Jewish Annotated New Testament).

One of the curiosities of this description of the family tree is that the names of several women are mentioned and they are all women who were on the outer and unlikely in that regard to be suitable carriers of the hope of Israel and yet here they are named as great great great great grandmothers of this humble baby in whom the hopes of the world lay. Tamar, possibly Gentile, who conceives twins by her father-in-law (having posed as a prostitute and seduced him

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because he had failed to take up his family responsibilities by his deceased son's wife). Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who was faithful to Joshua's spies and therefore spared when Jericho fell and it seems became a wife of Salmon a solid citizen and produced Boaz. Ruth, a Moabite woman whose mother-in-law Naomi works in desperate and dubious ways to have widowed daughter-in-law Ruth married to Boaz. And Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, who is seduced by King David who then has the husband murdered so he can claim his pregnant lover as wife. The child of their first union dies but they go on to produce Solomon. These scandalous women and the scandalous liaisons contributed to the genealogy of Joseph, the father of Jesus. Even though the story of the miraculous conception removes Joseph from the role of biological father it is his name and genealogy as line of David that Jesus is understood to be the fruit of. Many have speculated about the common theme between these women but maybe most simply their presence reminds us that Jesus became one of us, and came out of and in to our very human history. (See Elizabeth A. Johnson "Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture") And whilst Mary is revered as personally pure it also places in context the scandalous accusations that occurred to Joseph and that he only let go of because in a dream the Spirit called him to not be afraid to take this woman as his wife and as mother of this holy child.

Where in your own family tree and life has new life and blessing emerged out tawdry, broken, not very respectable history? In your prayers give thanks that the life giving Spirit of God has woven a garment of blessing out of the mess of your life and your history in the past. And pray that whatever is messy now might be made anew by the Spirit of God.

Day Five: Read all four texts

At long last the Christmas story we have all been waiting for. Sort of. Once again hearing the gospel in the context of the prophets and psalmists both makes the meaning more emphatic but also more complex.

We think the way in which Jesus saves us is by dying for us. This is what we celebrate every Easter and every Sunday when we take part of the holy meal. And of course it is true that the death of Jesus has a salvific effect. But there is no talk of death in the gospel account. The

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prophecy and the gospel focus is all on birth and those who contributed to the birthing of Emmanuel by prophesying, by dreaming, by succumbing to the spirit.

At the very least we need to hold birth and death as intertwined and of equal importance. Not just to be polite or theologically fair but because you cannot have one without the other. Indeed with Jesus it is always birth into life, death and resurrection. And with Jesus death is always a dying into the bigger cosmic life. This is not a cute small story. It is no less than the pouring of divinity into human life with all the delight and vulnerability that birth and bodily life means.

Now we are ready enough to celebrate the remembrance of the birth of baby Jesus and to invite the Christ into our world to be our hope, our restoration, and our initiator into a larger more just more loving life that will have no end.

Advent Week Four Group:

The theme this week announces that the birth of the holy child, God is with us, comes to us ready or not. We are longing for his arrival but somehow never quite ready.

According to the witness of Matthew this child comes to us, the fruit of all the generations of human kind, including all the famous and the infamous. A family history and relatives that we may not think fit for the Messiah and yet would recognise in our own family tree. There was a time when if we had a convict or criminal in our family tree we would keep quiet about it. But now we claim such relatives with pride. Partly I suspect to right the wrongs of history but I hope also because we recognise ourselves in the sinners and the saints in our family tree and in society.

Discuss:

We may embrace the scandalous in our own family tree but how do we feel about Jesus having some curious and dubious forebears in his own family tree? Are we shocked or a bit thrilled? Does it make sense to us that Emanuel, God with us, should join us so completely in the human enterprise that Jesus took upon himself not only humble flesh as in "flesh" but also flesh that was humble because it was so particularly human as in a very particular family that was both royal

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and terribly common? (Now we don't know anything about Mary's lineage but it would hardly be more noble than the royal line of David.)

Joseph has often been almost left out of the Jesus story but in Matthew's account he is at least as important as Mary. Joseph is both very conventional - he wishes to dismiss his betrothed for being pregnant - but also very open to the spirit and twice listens to and follows the prompting of the spirit that comes to him in dreams: firstly in taking Mary as his wife to protect her and insure the care for the unexpected infant; and then in discerning that they are at risk from Herod and taking his little family to Egypt by a back road and thus escaping the terrible jealous rage of Herod. How do you, or don't you, identify with Joseph and his struggle to be faithful in difficult and confusing circumstances?

The story of the birth of Jesus can be told as a very beautiful Christmas card or carol, or as a rather earthy and troubled story with characters very like ourselves. There is a wonderful quote from Meister Eckhart "What good is it to me that Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago, if I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born." How do you see yourself as giving birth to God in your world?

More information:

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