

On this, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Church directs us not to angels filling the sky, not to shepherds on the hills, but to *a man who has just learned that the woman he is engaged to is pregnant, & that the child is not his.*

That's right, at the start of Jesus' story, there is the threat of a scandal. But Joseph is a righteous man. He wants to do what is right before God, & he also wants to do what is kind. And so Joseph plans to end the engagement quietly, without making a scene & exposing Mary to shame.

And this is where we see the good news bearing fruit. God meets Joseph right in the middle of his fear & confusion. In a dream, the angel tells him not to be afraid. The child Mary carries is from the Holy Spirit. Far from being written out of the Holy Family, Joseph is given a crucial role: to take Mary as his wife, to name the child Jesus, & to trust that God is doing something new & saving through this unexpected situation.

Matthew then pauses the story to help us hear it within the larger story of Scripture. He quotes the prophet Isaiah: "Look, the young woman is with child & shall bear a son, & they shall name him Emmanuel."

Matthew tells us that this name means, “God is with us.”

And this is where we do well to slow down & listen carefully. In Isaiah’s own time, the prophet was speaking to King Ahaz during a political crisis. The “young woman” Isaiah refers to was part of that immediate setting. The sign Isaiah offered was about God’s faithfulness to Israel in a moment of danger.

In quoting this prophecy, Matthew is not forgetting that, in King Ahaz’s own time, his son Hezekiah was understood to be the fulfillment of the promise. Instead, Matthew is doing what faithful Jews had long done with Scripture: reading it again in the light of *what God is doing now*. It is not enough that God’s word once spoke true: in the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that God’s word “is alive and active” (4:12), & we see this in Matthew hearing Isaiah’s words with ears attuned to his own time. What pointed to God’s presence in one moment of crisis now speaks again, more fully, in the life of Jesus. That is the power of Scripture.

For Matthew, the birth of Jesus does not cancel Isaiah’s meaning — it deepens the meaning. The God who was with Israel then is with God’s people now in a way that is personal, vulnerable, & close. *Emmanuel* is

not just a reassurance spoken from a prophet but a child who needs to be named, nurtured,& protected.

This matters for us, because it tells us about how God works. God does not wait for perfect understanding or perfect obedience. Joseph doesn't have all his questions answered. The angel doesn't give Joseph a detailed plan. He receives just enough to take the next faithful steps. As Matthew reports, "Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him."

Joseph's obedience is not dramatic or heroic. He quietly listens. He stands by Mary, taking her into his home. By doing so, Joseph claims the child & takes responsibility for him. God's saving work moves forward through that ordinary act of trust.

For us, so close to Christmas, this is good news. It does not mean that life suddenly becomes clear or easy. *God with us* — "the Lord saves" (the meaning of the name Jesus) — means that God enters the very places where we feel unsure, afraid, or stretched beyond what we had neatly planned. God is with us in decisions we never expected to make, in responsibilities we did not seek out, & in relationships that require patience & courage.

Each denomination offers its own insights & blindness, & the Anglican tradition is especially strong at holding things together rather than forcing quick answers. We trust that Scripture speaks in more than one register at once. Isaiah speaks in his own time. Matthew speaks in his. And the Spirit speaks to us now, in our time, as we listen. The heart of the message is the life-altering promise that God has not remained distant: God has come near, & God continues his work of sustaining & re-creating the world.

Advent does not rush us to the manger. It leads us to live in trust. Joseph shows us what it means to wait for the Lord: listening, obeying, & staying present to what God places before us — no matter how it might surprise us. The promise we hear today is simple & strong. In Jesus, God is with us. Not just in memory, but here, right now, in the midst of our messy lives.

As we move toward Christmas, may we receive God's promise with the same steady faith. And may we find the courage to take the next step, trusting that God's word to Mary truly means what it says: God is with us. Amen.