

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, Christ the light of the world and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

Advent always draws us forward, but the Fourth Sunday of Advent does something different. It slows us down right at the edge. We are almost at Christmas now. The carols are ready, the story is familiar, the ending feels certain. And yet the lectionary asks us not to rush. It invites us to pause with a story that is anything but tidy. A story about risk, trust, misunderstanding, and love that enters the world in a way no one expects. I so wanted to proclaim a simple and straightforward message of love coming down to dwell among us. But as I sat with the Gospel from Matthew this week, I felt I had to address the difficulties with the text.

By the time Matthew writes, the early church is wrestling with a pressing question. Not whether Jesus mattered, but who Jesus truly is. The Roman world is full of claims about divine power. Caesars are called sons of god. Authority is displayed through violence, control, and domination. Matthew responds by telling a story that quietly but firmly insists on something else entirely. A child will be born and be called Emmanuel. This child is God with us. Not God above us, not God watching from a distance, but God sharing our flesh. And so for Matthew it is super important how Jesus was born, he wants to establish Jesus' *bona fides* so to speak. Matthew starts with referring to a prophecy from Isaiah to demonstrate that Jesus is the one who was promised. That's our reading this morning. "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted." (Isa 7:15–16)

There is so much to say about this passage, but I'll try to be brief. First let's tackle the question, "who is Isaiah speaking about here"?

The prophet Isaiah speaks once again into a moment of deep political fear. In previous weeks we have read from parts of Isaiah which were at the time of the first exile into Assyria and also from the second exile into Babylon. This story is before the first exile into Assyria. King Ahaz of Judah is terrified. The King of Aram which is approximately the area around Damascus (where the Aramaic language comes from), and the King of Israel threaten his kingdom of Judah. Yes, you heard that right. God's nation of Israel had divided into two, Israel to the north and Judah in the south and they were often at war. This time Israel teams up with another ally hoping to finally conquer Judah. The future feels fragile, unstable, out of Ahaz's control. God offers him a sign, something as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. Just ask! But Ahaz refuses. Maybe he is too terrified for defiant hope and trust. So God gives one anyway. Isn't that beautiful? Even when he can't make the move to trust, God moves towards him and provides it for him! God assures Ahaz that these 2 kings will not prevail. In fact, their land will be deserted in a very short while. Before the child is old enough to know good from evil, the threat will pass. And it does. The mighty Assyrian Empire rises up and conquers Aram and Israel and takes their people into exile.

So this prophecy was for the time of Ahaz. A young woman **is** with child and will bear a son, and his name will be Immanuel. **Is** with child, not **will be**. But here's the thing about God's living word. It can be read and reinterpreted in each generation. The Jews are known for this. They even have a specific word for this kind of interpretation; it is called peshet. Peshet reads ancient Scripture as a coded text whose true meaning is unveiled in the interpreter's own time as God's hidden

plan comes to fulfillment. Christians have continued this tradition predicting the end times century after century as about to happen in their time.

This one phrase: “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel” was taken by Matthew to refer to Jesus. Emmanuel, God with us. Unlike Caesar, Jesus really is divine! And for that to happen, according to Matthew, he could not just be born from the union of man and woman. Matthew is at pains to tell us that Mary and Joseph have not consummated their marriage and that the Holy Spirit is mysteriously responsible for her pregnancy. Jesus is both human and divine.

Paul, writing to the Romans, brings these threads together in a densely woven (as he often does) opening blessing. Jesus is descended from David according to the flesh. Fully human. Rooted in history. **And** he is declared Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness. Fully divine. Flesh and Spirit held together, not separated. This is the mystery at the heart of Christian faith.

Matthew hears that ancient promise to Ahaz and recognizes a pattern. This is how God works. God does not wait for perfect faith, perfect courage, or perfect circumstances. God comes anyway. God enters history not as an idea or a concept, but as a living, breathing human being. Love does not stay at a safe distance. Love comes down and dwells among us. And so he quotes this prophecy. And he uses the scripture he has, which is not the Hebrew text but the Greek translation, the Septuagint. And the Greek translates the Hebrew word for young girl, *almah*, as virgin, *parthenos*. That change has caused trouble over the centuries, and we need to name that honestly. The doctrine of the virgin conception has too often been reduced to an argument about sexual purity. It has been used to shame women, to

control bodies, and to suggest that holiness depends on sexual status. That distortion has wounded people deeply, and it is not faithful to the heart of the Gospel. Matthew is not offering a biological explanation. He proclaims a theological confession. Matthew is saying that from the very beginning, this life is God's initiative. This child does not come into being through human power, male control, or dynastic ambition. This child comes into the world through the creative work of the Spirit.

Matthew is not trying to write Joseph out of the story, in fact even the genealogy he gives ends with Joseph. He plays a crucial role. Matthew calls him righteous. Not because he rigidly applies the law, but because he responds to God with compassion. Joseph could have protected himself. He could have exposed Mary, justified his actions, preserved his honour. Instead, he chooses mercy and compassion. He chooses not to shame her. And when God speaks to him in a dream, he listens. Joseph's righteousness is not about rule-keeping. It is about love-in-action. He trusts that God is doing something new, even when it disrupts his plans. He takes Mary as his wife. He names the child. And he becomes part of love's descent into the world.

We don't get the same focused attention on Mary in Matthew as we do in Luke. There is no Magnificat, no song of Mary. Yet even in Matthew, her courage is unmistakable. To be found with child before marriage is dangerous. It threatens her safety, her reputation, her future. And yet she makes room for God. Love comes down, and Mary says yes, not because it's easy, but because God came to her. This is what love looks like in Matthew's Gospel. It is quiet. It is risky. It is faithful. Love comes down not with spectacle, but through ordinary people who choose courage over fear.

From the very beginning, Matthew is telling us that this is not a sanitized story. This is a story about God entering real human life, with all its complexity and vulnerability. God enters the world not through force, but through consent, trust, and vulnerability. God comes down as love to dwell among us.

At Advent we are invited to linger with the astonishing claim that God does not love us from a safe distance, but from the inside of our own flesh. Evelyn Underhill says that the Incarnation is the declaration that God is present in the physical order, and that matter is capable of bearing the divine. We experience that every time we take a walk in the forest, or hold the hand of a sick loved one, or take the bread and wine. Last week we heard Heloise read from Rachel Held Evans who reminds us that salvation begins not with a decree but with a pregnancy—God choosing dependence, vulnerability, and a human body formed cell by cell in Mary's womb. And Nadia Bolz-Weber insists that God's entry into human flesh means that bodies—new born, messy, aging, desiring bodies—are not obstacles to holiness but the very place where God chooses to dwell. How amazing is that? The spiritual life is never an escape from the physical world but God's life unfolding within it. God became flesh and dwelt among us, each and every one of us, our bodies, our lives, our selves. God dwells within us through all the messiness of our lives; through joy and sorrow, through our best times and our worst times, even the things we carry in shame. In the Mary's womb, God sanctifies all that we experience, even our suffering.

This Sunday is not really about how a pregnancy happened. It is about who God is. It is about what kind of love we are talking about when we say that love came down to dwell among us. Like Mary, we are invited to make room. Like Joseph, we are invited to choose mercy and compassion. Advent four stands right at

the edge of mystery. We are not asked to explain it, only to welcome it. We are not asked to solve it, only to dwell with it long enough for love to take flesh again in our lives, in our very own bodies, created by a loving God.

Emmanuel continues to dwell among us and in us. Love has come down into fragile lives. Into uncertain futures. Into communities longing for restoration. Emmanuel is not only a name from the past. It is a promise for the present. Right here, right now, God is with us. God is within us. Even in this complicated, wounded, beautiful world. And that is very good news.

We have journeyed through the four weeks of Advent. Starting with defiant hope and moving into deep peace, and resilient joy, and finally arriving at love, the greatest of these. God's *hesed*, steadfast love. A love that endures all things, forgives all things, heals all things. God's love, come down to dwell among us.

And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.