

Emmanuel -- Advent 4A

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." In other words, "Go ahead, try me." But Ahaz said, "I will not put the Lord to the test; far be it from me..." Isaiah's response: "Come on, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary each other, that you have to weary God also?" The two sound like combatants on some painful television talk show, arguing and posturing about what constitutes real, inside truth. Ahaz insists: "I would never ask The Lord for a sign; I know better." To that, Isaiah rolls his eyes some more in frustration: "Why do I have to deal with such dummies, wasting my time – wasting The Lord's time too?"

In a recent paper, *Are Talking Heads Blowing Hot Air?* political scientists demonstrate that the so-called 'experts' we see and hear on television and in the papers, make accurate predictions about politics, economics and current events slightly over half the time. Not a very good track record, especially considering the vehemence and superiority with which the predictions are made. Ahaz and Isaiah were the pundits of their time, but Isaiah is the one we remember, because he was proven right. He says, "Therefore the Lord will give you a sign. Look, there will be a young woman who shall bear a son; she shall name him Immanuel."

What's in a name? Immanuel, or Emmanuel came into being as a name when predicted by Isaiah. It was a name with cosmic significance, literally: 'God is with us.' People all over the Western world have been naming their babies

Emmanuel or Emmanuelle ever since. Up and down Europe and the Mediterranean, across the Americas we hear it, in Greek and Hungarian, Spanish and Swedish, Romanian, Hebrew, German and Polish. God is with us; God is among us.

One web search asserts that people with this name have a deep inner desire to serve humanity and to give to others by sharing money, knowledge and experience, or creative and artistic ability. They tend to be creative and excellent at expressing themselves, are drawn to the arts, and enjoy life immensely. They are often the center of attention, with careers that put them in the limelight. Involved in many different activities, they can be reckless with their energies and with money. What's in a name, indeed! We don't need an expert to tell us what a tall order this is. It sounds like a description of God's very self! However often our Manny's fit the description above, when Isaiah prophesies that a child will be born Emmanuel, the expectations for that child are bound to be very high indeed.

Unlike Luke's version, Matthew's gospel account of the birth of Jesus is mostly about Joseph, not Mary. It is Joseph who has the vision of Isaiah's prophecy being fulfilled in his own time and place, through his own family. It is Joseph's radical compassion for his wife and great leap of faith in setting aside the strictures of the day that make room for Jesus. "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." Notice the angel of God knows that it is fear that results in taboos and purity codes. 'Joseph, set aside your fear and God will be with you' – and with us all, thanks to you.

Somehow, between the original Hebrew and the Greek translation that was in use when the Gospels were written down, the word for 'young woman' turned into 'virgin.' As with our TV pundits, vying for extra special righteousness, it was not enough to describe Mary as a young woman, miraculously and spontaneously pregnant. No, she had to be pure, too, hence: 'virgin' became her descriptive name. What becomes clear, as we brush away the politics and patriarchal posturing is that the fact of Mary's pregnancy is, like life itself, wondrous, but the nature of her childbearing in that cultural environment are miraculous beyond all precedent, singular almost beyond imagining.

As Joseph dreams on, the angel continues: "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus." And when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. A little confusion here: I thought he was supposed to name him Emmanuel, with all those qualities... But Jesus means 'God Saves,' so we call it close enough.

We note the miracle takes place in the context of a family. Mary sets aside her fears and accepts the life God wants to give her. Joseph sets aside his fears and accepts the life God wants to give him in a family. Without these two acts of faith, there would have been no place for God to be with us. Joseph's decision to extend love to Mary despite her "previous condition" creates a space where God can dwell with us, where God can do some saving.

Joseph and Mary created a space for God to dwell in, a family wherein the most amazing event of history could take place. And then, having been born in such an environment of faith, justice and unconditional love, Jesus

cold became who he was, could fulfill his astonishing potential. It is a political story as much as it is a spiritual one. Because peace and justice do not come about when great powers exercise themselves, or when one great power defeats another. Peace and justice only come when those who gain and possess power, like the power Joseph has over Mary, choose to use it peaceably and justly, riskily and radically, with laughter and love. Is it a coincidence that Joseph shares the name of the ancestor whose forgiveness – of his Egyptian oppressors and of his own brothers – had made survival possible for Israel, back in the day?

Sometimes in the Eucharist, we'll hear the phrase, "Be what you see, become who you are." God has given us this story so we can know what it's like to flourish because of love and justice, regardless of our origins and impurities. Perhaps the child was so nourished in the spiritually expansive garden of his family's love that he grew to adulthood without ever doubting his faith. As Richard Rohr has observed, Jesus came to reveal the dualism of the spiritual versus the so-called secular to be untrue and incomplete. By his very existence, Jesus modeled for us that these two seemingly different worlds are and always have been one. We just couldn't imagine it intellectually until God put them together in one body that we could see and touch and love. Ephesians 2:22: "In Christ you also are being built into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." What an amazing realization that should shock and delight us!

We are the body of Christ; we are the incarnation, too. Saint Augustine said this in the early fifth century. The sacrament of the Eucharist is for the sake of the people, to

transform the people, to let them know that they are what they eat. And nobody is beyond the reach of God's transformative power. "When we seek to be a genuinely spiritual community, when we passionately desire to be a community of new birth, then we can be taken seriously as products of the Christmas miracle. Christmas does not happen for us by itself, we are our own Christmas," wrote William Dixon Gray.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once insisted: "Is it not time to present the matter of Christianity exactly the way it is by taking away all this false reverence for Jesus; by stopping to mistake the stream for the source?" In his determination to eliminate anything in our story that gets in the way of a fully rational understanding of things, Emerson discards the miraculous truth of Christmas, the part that can neither be explained nor explained away, that is: Emmanuel. He should have known better. The perfect proof that God is indeed with us can only be experienced through human experience of choosing love over power, like Joseph did, and his namesake before him; like Jesus would, like we can. As Yoda would say, "Wander, we might, but return we must" to this truth: God is with us, and within us, Immanuel, whenever we choose to love.