

The Sunday Missive – December 18, 2022

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hymn 497 How bright appears the morning star

How bright appears the Morning Star, with mercy beaming from afar;
The host of heaven rejoices;
O righteous Branch, O Jesse's Rod! Thou Son of Man and Son of God!
We, too, will lift our voices: Jesus, Jesus!
Holy, holy, yet most lowly, draw thou near us;
Great Emmanuel, come and hear us.

Though circled by the hosts on high, he deigned to cast a pitying eye
Upon his helpless creature;
The whole creation's Head and Lord, by highest seraphim adored,
Assumed our very nature; Jesus, grant us,
Through thy merit, to inherit thy salvation;
Hear, O hear our supplication.

Rejoice, ye heavens; thou earth, reply;
With praise, ye sinners, fill the sky, for this his Incarnation.
Incarnate God, put forth thy power, ride on, ride on, great Conqueror,
Till all know thy salvation. Amen, amen! Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise be given evermore, by earth and heaven.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LInu_tmf4MM&t=109s

The Collect of the Day

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 7:10-16

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. But Ahaz said, I will not ask,

and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. 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."

Psalm 80

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock* ***Shine forth, you who are enthroned with the cherubim.***

In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh* ***Stir up your strength and come to help us.***

Restore us, O God of hosts* ***Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.***

O Lord God of hosts* ***How long will you be angered despite the prayers of your people?***

You have fed them with the bread of sorrow* ***You have given them tears to drink.***

You have made us the derision of our neighbors* ***Our enemies laugh us to scorn.***

Restore us, O God of hosts* ***Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.***

Let your hand be upon those who serve you* ***The daughters and sons you have made strong for yourself.***

And we will never turn away from you again* ***Give us life, that we may call upon your name.***

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts* ***Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.***

Romans 1:1-7

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Hymn 56 O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go.

O come, O come, great Lord of might, who to your tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times did give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem, unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o'er the grave.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iO7ySn-Swwc>

Luke 1:39-56

In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her

by the Lord.” And Mary remained with her cousin about three months and then returned to her home in Nazareth.

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...” And Isaiah’s response is along the lines of: “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 the 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 God’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 about half the time. Not a very good track record, especially considering the vehemence and superiority with which the predictions are made. Consider how wildly inaccurate all the experts have been about Ukraine, for example. While real experts like Tony Fauci are ignored – and far worse – by large swaths of our population. Ahaz and Isaiah were the wise ones 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 Manuela 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, nor how it takes more than a name to nurture character. It sounds like a description of God's very self! However often our Manny's do or don't fit the description above, when Isaiah prophesies that a child will be born Emmanuel, the expectations for that child are very high indeed.

Unlike Luke's version of the birth of Jesus we just heard, Matthew's gospel account 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." 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 could become who he was, could fulfil 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 a celebration of Holy 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. Jesus came to reveal the dualism of the spiritual versus the so-called secular to be untrue and incomplete.

Malcolm Guite observes: "We don't have to choose between reason and imagination. We don't have to choose between science and religion. And we don't have to choose between serious intellectual inquiry and deeply held faith. I think these things are enfolded aspects, each depending on different primal ways of knowing. To do theology well, we must bring the poets to the table along with the theologians and

listen to what they say.” Or, as Theseus makes clear in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven; And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.”

By his very existence, Jesus modeled for us the truth that these two seemingly different worlds are and always have been one. God has put them together in one body we could see and touch and love. “In Christ you also are being built into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Ephesians 2:22: What an amazing realization to 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?” Yes, rationality is very useful for finding and arranging information. But reason can be plain useless when it comes to gaining wisdom. 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.

Hymn 57 Lo! He comes with clouds descending

Lo! he comes with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain;
Thousand, thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ the Lord returns to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him, pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears,
Cause of endless exultation to his ransomed worshipers;
With what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture,
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, amen! let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory; claim the kingdom for thine own:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjn3fBTvBjY&t=9s>

Launde Abbey on St. Lucy's Day

St. Lucy's day is brief and bright with frost,
In round cupped dew ponds shallow waters freeze,
Delicate fronds and rushes are held fast,
The low sun brings a contrast to the trees
Whose naked branches, dark against the skies
And fringed with glory by the light behind,
In patterns too severe for tired eyes,
Burn their bright beauty on the weary mind.
Saint Lucy's sun still bathes these abbey walls
And in her garden rose stalks stark and bare
Shine in a frosty light that yet recalls
The glory of the summer roses there.
Though winter night will soon surround us here,
Another Advent comes, Dayspring is near.

Malcolm Guite