

Advent 4A (12/18/16)

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Jesus' advent represents a transition from an old to a new reality. If his lineage establishes continuity with the past, his arrival signals a miraculous beginning-again by the power of the Holy Spirit. Emmanuel won't let us be what we've always been, but he will lead us into a new life unburdened by our sin and its consequences. Trusting that this call is from God, we can respond to it without fear, no matter where it leads.

At Peace Lutheran Church, we treasure our legacy. Some of us count our ancestors among the founders of this congregation, and others count the decades that we have called it home. Some of us were baptized here, and others have brought our children and even our grandchildren to the font to receive God's gracious invitation into the family of faith. I am new among you, yet even I stand in a long line of pastors who have served you over the course of more than a century. I follow in the footsteps of the pastor whose nine children filled the house next door to nearly overflowing, the pastor who monitored participation at Holy Communion with all the severity of the Swiss Guard, and the pastor who, much to the surprise of those who greeted him, arrived on a motorcycle. **Our congregational family tree has deep roots, and we owe our identity in large part to our heritage. We are who we are because of who we have been.**

The Gospel writer of Matthew knows something about heritage. In fact, his Gospel begins with a genealogy, a list of forty-two generations from Abraham to Jesus. Among Jesus' ancestors are Israel's patriarchs and kings, as flawed as they were faithful, as well as several unforgettable women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth,

Bathsheba, and, of course, Mary – through whom the line of King David was established and preserved. Matthew’s reference to Jesus’ lineage places the newborn baby in a long line of God’s chosen people, and harkens back to the prophecy of a Messiah who would be counted among David’s progeny. So, Matthew goes out of his way to point out that **Jesus’ family tree has deep roots, and he owes his identity in large part to his heritage. He is who he is because of who his ancestors have been.**

Nevertheless, Matthew’s Christmas story makes it clear that Jesus’ ancestry does not restrict his potential. The baby Jesus is flesh and blood, as human as any of his quirky relatives, yet he is set apart by the circumstances of his conception: “Joseph, son of David,” the angel reassures his earthly father in a dream, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” *God has taken a special interest in this generation*, the angel insists, *and God’s Spirit is uniquely active in the life of this child.* **If Jesus’ lineage establishes continuity with the past, in other words, his arrival indicates a miraculous beginning-again by the power of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of who we expect the Messiah to be and how we assume he will act, the future is wide open.**

It’s hard to overestimate the uncertainty that must accompany this promise for Joseph. First of all, Mary’s unexpected pregnancy in the midst of their betrothal is a scandal. In the honor/shame system of first-century Palestine, an unplanned pregnancy is disastrous, not only for the mother, but also for the spouse-to-be and the child. Mary would be permanently disgraced, Joseph humiliated, and Jesus left

without a family to call his own. The safe bet for Joseph is to dismiss Mary quietly while there's still a chance to salvage his own reputation, at least.

Moreover, the pregnancy occurs in a very dark time for Jewish commoners in Palestine. Under the occupation of the Roman Empire, puppet kings rule with impunity. Herod is Jewish, but he functions essentially as an extension of Roman power, extracting exorbitant taxes from an already impoverished people. And, as we learn in the verses immediately following our Gospel for today, the birth of the Messiah poses a threat to Herod's own supremacy, and he stops at nothing to remove the competition, massacring countless children in the vicinity of Jesus' birthplace. **The terror of Herod's murderous rampage is not unlike the tragedies that power-hungry tyrants continue to unleash on entire populations even today.**

Yet, it is precisely amid this kind of terror and uncertainty that God enters our existence in the fragile life of an infant, Emmanuel, God-with-us. God is with us in the murkiest, most anxious moment in time, sharing our fears and our vulnerability. But the promise of the incarnation is that Emmanuel will also be called Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins," as the angel explains to Joseph. **The purpose of his advent, in other words – indeed, the very meaning of his first name – is *salvation*.** *This is the Messiah for whom you have been waiting, declares the messenger of good news, and this Messiah, enlivened by the divine Spirit, is none other than God in your midst, who joins you in your human existence, yet who rescues you from the worst of it.*

So, Jesus' advent represents a transition from an old to a new reality.

“Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”¹ This is a thrilling prospect until we realize that the new life the Messiah makes possible for us also means relinquishing much of what we cling to in the old life – our old hostilities, our old fears, our old indifference. **Jesus' arrival signals a miraculous beginning-again by the power of the Holy Spirit, but beginning again means reimagining the possibilities for human life. So, even as we treasure our heritage, we also recognize that our future will not be our past. Emmanuel won't let us be what we've always been, but he will lead us into a new life unburdened by our sin and its consequences.**

What's in store for us in the transition? Joseph certainly has no idea what's in store for him as he welcomes his remarkable child into the world. There are no guarantees. Yet, he trusts that the angel's word of promise is of God. And that, dear church, is the call of Advent. **In spite of our fear and vulnerability, the advent of the Messiah is a summons into a way of life marked by God's own presence, and led by God's own Spirit. Trusting that this call is from God, we can respond to it without fear, no matter where it leads.**

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17.