

God with us in Faithfulness

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2016

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Texts: Isaiah 7.10-16;
 Psalm 80.1-7, 17-19;
 Romans 1.1-7;
 Matthew 1.18-25

As Christians who celebrate Advent, not one long six week celebration of Christmas, but Advent – we can find ourselves a bit out of step with the culture around us. Especially since the way that Christmas is celebrated in our culture is so incredibly sentimental. I feel like we fall into a deep nostalgic stupor this time of year. I don't mean to sound harsh about it. I actually love this time of year and can get swept up in nostalgia with the best of them and do so happily.

But what we are invited into spiritually in our worship is something all together different. The voices speaking out of our texts are strong and urgent, strident even at moments; looking to shake us awake so that we are alert and ready and watching for the ways that God is with us.

We hear from John the Baptist; it doesn't get more strident than our brother, John. We hear from the prophet Isaiah and from the prophet Mary when she sings the Magnificat. Each of these voices beats the drum of justice because even as they long for and envision a day of peace they know that peace cannot come until that which is wrong is made right. Two weeks ago I ended my sermon sharing a story of someone who woke up to this call of justice in the middle of a grocery store and found the courage to stand up and speak out. I know that many of you felt convicted by that story in the same way I felt when I first heard it. I'm ok with that. This work of God-with-us is a work forming us and re-forming us so that we can be faithful.

This is why Jesus came according to Paul in his opening words to the church in Rome: "we have received grace...to bring about the obedience of

faith.”¹ That call to the obedience of faith has taken a particular edge for me this Advent. I hear the voices of the prophets chanting in one ear and the needs of our world in the other.

The prophets are insistent: “Keep awake²; Repent for the kingdom is near³; God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly⁴.” The needs of the world are just as urgent and people have been feeling the urgency. Over 250 people showed up at the library on a Tuesday night in the middle of December for an event entitled “Allies for Social Justice and Environmental Progress.”⁵ I had the honor of facilitating the break out session on Religious Tolerance with a wonderful new friend I made named Zahabia Amed-Usmani. She was one of the panel speakers before breaking into our work sessions. She gave a very articulate description of what it is like to be Muslim-American in this current context. It is not a pretty picture. When we were planning for the Religious Tolerance session we wondered how much interest there would be with this topic. We were stunned to be in a packed room with people wanting to talk together about how we can respond.

The impact of the words of the prophets in one ear and the needs of the world in the other is a clear call: “Don’t just sit there – DO something!” After all, as Gordon asked us last week, do we believe that “God cares about and is at work in this world...nothing is impossible with God and that God needs people and that there are people willing to be needed by God.” Which begs the question: are you willing to be one of those people? Willing to stand up and speak out and do something?

This is the word I would leave you with if these texts from today hadn’t kept quietly, gently nudging in a different direction. We have the story of Joseph. He is not the mover and shaker of this story. We never hear his voice. But I was taken this week by his utter faithfulness. His quiet, steady, vulnerable, risk-taking faithfulness. Can you imagine the heart break, the sense of betrayal, the anger that must have flared within Joseph’s heart

¹ Romans 1.5, NRSV

² Advent 1: Matthew 24.42, NRSV

³ Advent 2: Matthew 3.2, NRSV

⁴ Advent 3: Luke 1.52, NRSV

⁵ The event was sponsored by the Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance.

when he learned that the woman he loved was expecting a child that was not his? If you have ever been on the receiving end of that kind of betrayal you know from the inside what the expression “seeing red” is all about. Joseph could have given voice to that righteous rage and no one would have judged him for it. But somehow inside that broken heart he found an opening for compassion: “Being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”⁶

When I think about faithfulness and obedience I don’t often think first of compassion. But that is what faithfulness looks like in this text. And Joseph offers it before he learns the truth about what is happening here. It’s a vulnerable move that he makes. It made me think of something a colleague sent around to a number of us this week. It was a video of a man named Karim who stood out on a city street with a blind fold around his eyes holding a sign that said in part: “I am an Arab-American, like many people who are black, brown, women, LGBTQ, Latino, Muslim, Jewish, Immigrants and Other, I’m scared....But I have hope that I am safe with you. Together we can build a community of caring, rather than one of fear....Will you embrace me as I willingly embrace you? Will you shake my hand, or hug me, or take your picture with me...I trust you.”⁷ And the video captures people reading the sign and looking strangely at him and the first brave soul to walk up and hug him and then the others who do the same.

And I thought about this man that somehow when his heart was broken and gripped in fear he found an opening for compassion. It was risky for him to put himself out there like that. But it was precisely his vulnerability that opened up the response of compassion from the people around him. God is with us in these moments of vulnerable, risk-taking faithfulness.

So how do we nurture those spaces for the Spirit to open our hearts? This week when I was at Hope Church yoga (we don’t actually have Hope Church yoga - I just happened to be at a class that only had three people and we were all from Hope Church) as we began the class the instructor set an intention for us. Usually we get to set our own intention for the class but

⁶ Matthew 1.19, NRSV

⁷ <https://vimeo.com/193125533>

she had something on her mind she wanted to share. She said were going to working on opening our hearts to compassion. Which on a physical level included shoulder and upper back work which was very helpful for all the snow shoveling. But on the spiritual level what we were working on was opening our hearts. She shared a quote from the Dali Lama's book *The Art of Happiness*: "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." Since that class I've been intentionally combining those opening moves with my breath as a prayer that the Spirit opens my heart to compassion.

On Friday night I was at a party talking with some clergy colleagues and the conversation moved to the Classis meeting. In January when the pastors and elders of this area meet, we will be voting on some proposed changes to the book of order having to do with rules around marriage. Because that is what clergy talk about at parties. There was also dancing and I'll have know that the host of the evening named my esteemed colleague the party animal of the night so you can be proud of Pastor Gordon for that honor! But before the dancing we were talking about Classis. This colleague shared that he and his consistory have made a commitment to read the first eleven verses of Philippians 2 every morning for the next month. I'll read the first verse just to jog your memory: "If then, there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." It's not because this pastor has questions about how to vote. It's that he is convinced that how we conduct ourselves around difficult and contentious decisions matters. He longs for us to be faithful as we try to find our way forward together.

I have a dear friend who is one of the brightest intellectual minds that I know who regularly receives insight from the Spirit through her dreams. When she is working through something she will bring all of the gifts of her intellect to the question in her waking hours and then as she goes to bed she will pray for dreams to come to her and do they ever. I have turned to her with difficult decisions and asked her to pray for a dream for me. When I think about how this dream worked on Joseph (he has not one but three dreams in his short appearance in the gospels), the dream cut

through his preconceived ideas about the situation and opened up his vision to the wider view of what God was doing. If we are to be faithful we need to see the wider view.

Friends, I have no doubt that there is much that God seeks to do with the passion of the prophets moving through us. Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary - their insistent voices for justice and action call to us in this season. There are moments to stand up and speak out....no question.

I also have no doubt that there is much that God needs to do with us and inside of us if we are to be faithful participants in what God is doing. There are probably just as many moments for us to sit down and be quiet and just listen for the Spirit's leading....through our breath, through the scriptures, through our dreams.

The overarching call of this season is to trust that God IS with us. With that sense of trust and conviction let us come to celebrate the birth of our Lord!