

**Advent IV (Year A)**

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

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“The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’”

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Three days ‘till Christmas. What are you waiting for? Maybe you’re waiting for family to come into town, or you’re waiting to leave for somewhere yourself. Maybe you’re waiting to hear from someone you love, or waiting for a gift you’ve been longing for. Maybe if you’re young (or young at heart), you’re waiting for Santa to come down the chimney and leave some presents under your tree. Maybe you’re waiting on your next paycheck, knowing that things will be tight this month. Or maybe you’re waiting for a diagnosis, for the test results to come in. Maybe you’re waiting for the holidays to just be over—for the stress level to go down, or for the bittersweet reminders of those who are no longer here to fade just a bit, so the days can be a little more manageable. What are you waiting for?

Advent is about waiting. For the past four weeks, we’ve been waiting—for Christ to come again this year at Christmas—for the twelve days when we remember his incarnation, his coming to be with us those many years ago. And, at the same time, we’ve been waiting for Christ’s second coming, for that hour that no one knows, for his promised return of peace, justice, reconciliation—for the end of all that is evil, all that is sin, all that is death. Both of these things, each year: waiting for the birth of the baby, and waiting for the birth of peace.

And the funny thing about Advent is that we’ve been here before. Unless this is your first Advent, you’ve probably grown used to this waiting. We’re waiting this year, and God willing, we’ll wait again next year. We’ve done this. We know the stories. “At this point, can God honestly surprise us?” we might be forgiven for thinking. Well, if we take our gospel lesson this morning to heart, I think we might find that the answer is yes.

In Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus, when the angel appears to Joseph, we hear Isaiah’s prophecy, the same one from our Old Testament lesson: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” An 800-year old prophecy by the time of the New Testament, something long foretold that Joseph, as a first-century Jewish man, would have known well himself. Joseph knew about waiting, because the people of Israel knew about waiting. Waiting to be free from slavery in Egypt. Waiting to enter the promised land. Waiting to come home from exile. Waiting for the Messiah. Waiting, it seems, is part of what it means to be God’s chosen people.

And yet, when the time comes, what happens? What does Joseph hear? The young woman to whom you are engaged—it is she who is to conceive and bear a son. She already has. Mary, your fiancée, is to be the Mother of God. This young woman on the brink of scandal—whom you’re about to get rid of—is she of whom Isaiah spoke. There’s something that Joseph could not have been waiting for—that no one was expecting. Furthermore, this child who is to come into the world will be born not in a palace, nor in a temple. But in Bethlehem, a quiet village, to this poor young woman, now married to a man who is not the father of her child. Who would have expected this? How could this child be the Messiah, the long-awaited one, the Savior of God’s people?

“‘The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” Is this really he? This unexpected child? Well, we know from the rest of Matthew’s story, and from the other gospels, that this child’s birth is not the only thing about him that is unexpected. This is the child who will become a refugee in Egypt, who will call fisher folk to be his friends, who will say blessed are those who mourn and those who are persecuted, who will touch lepers, and hang out with tax collectors and sinners. This is the child who will break the law on the Sabbath, who will feed five thousand people with just some fish and some bread, and who will pray with little children. This is the child who will be arrested, beaten, and crucified, who will die with his mother looking on. And this is the child who will rise on the third day, and destroy death forever.

If we believe that this unexpected, unlikely child is Emmanuel, then we have very good news indeed. For in Jesus, in his whole life, and death, and resurrection, God is with us not in pomp, circumstance, and majesty, not as a figure on a throne above us, but with us, sharing our life, sharing our human condition, the beauty and the brokenness. Emmanuel. God is with us.

If this Jesus is Emmanuel, then God is with you, and not only when things are going well, or when you’re healthy, or feel good. Not only when you’re playing by the rules, or doing what others expect you to do. No, God is also with you when things are going really bad, when you’re sick, or stressed, or anxious, or depressed. God is with you when other people look at you and whisper, because like Mary you’re not the right kind of parent, or like Jesus, the right kind of child. Or because you’re acting in a way or being yourself in a way that our society would rather shame. And God is with you too when you’ve really messed up, and you don’t know who is ever going to forgive you. God is with you when you’re alone, and when you’re really sad. And God is with you when you die, and will be long after your name is forgotten in this place. This is what Jesus—his unlikely birth, and his unlikely life—shows us. God is with us.

And so, here’s the paradox of Advent: we’re waiting, but God is here with us already—God’s been here the whole time. God is here, but we’re waiting. Christ was born long ago, but we’re waiting to remember it again. Through his resurrection, Christ overcame sin and the grave, but we still sin and hurt each other. Christ is the Prince of Peace, but there’s still war. Christ was raised from the dead, but we still die. This is Advent. Christ has come among us, but we’re still waiting—waiting for him to come again, waiting for the day when all shall be well. That’s what this season points us to. We’re waiting. But God is with us. Amen.