

Advent 4A. December 18, 2016. Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25.

The promise that today holds out to us is that God is with us and will be with us. Of course the claim is that God is always with us, but today's readings particularly emphasize that God is with us in those times when we are most likely to become enchanted by our apparent abandonment. In those longest nights, on the worst days, as we dangle our toes over the precipice of despair, God is right there. We get two striking and disparate examples from the Bible this morning. First, Isaiah issues the promise during a time of public, global, national crisis—almost hammering the whimpering King Ahaz with the promise that God is here and is coming, even as his kingdom seems to be falling apart. And then Matthew reiterates it in the most intimate setting: a betrothed marriage that looks to be broken by apparent infidelity. As Joseph's private, personal world is thrown into absolute chaos by Mary's pregnancy, Matthew reminds us: God is here, in this moment, right now.

Let's start with Isaiah. I don't want us to get too deep into the weeds here, but it's important that we have some sense of what's going on in this passage. Ahaz is the king of Judah, the southern portion of the formerly unified kingdom of Israel. Jerusalem is the capitol of Judah, if that helps orient you. Judah isn't a particularly strong political power at this time, and they are currently being threatened by at least two other kingdoms. Their kin, the northern portion of the formerly unified kingdom is typically just referred to as Israel. And they have teamed up with another country, Aram, to attack Judah. Just to emphasize how Game of Thrones-y this situation is, the enemy alliance is formed because Judah won't join a coalition to attack the real big power of this time, Assyria. Avoiding that coalition is smart, because the three little countries together still stand no chance against the big bad Assyrians.

But okay, don't get caught up in those details. What really matters here is that Ahaz is king of Judah, and Judah is currently being threatened with a war that they can't win. The stakes are as high as they can possibly be and Ahaz is more or less helpless. If he fights this coalition against him, he will lose. If he joins them and does what they want, all three of them will be crushed by the much larger power of another country. Things could go badly enough that Judah may entirely cease to exist. And they have a weak leader, to boot. Verse 2 of this chapter says that when Ahaz heard these guys were coming, his heart and the heart of his people "shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."

And in strides this prophet, Isaiah, who demands that Ahaz ask God for a sign, which he refuses to do, while covering his cowardice in nice pious phrases. As a side note, he isn't the last guy to find a nice pious reason not to have to do something that makes him uncomfortable. The sign is just the yet unborn kid of a pregnant lady nearby. He is to be named Immanuel, a promise that God is here, with Ahaz in his terror and helplessness and ineffectiveness. And with the people who find themselves dependent on his poor leadership. There's a further promise that these two kingdoms who are threatening Judah are living on borrowed time, if the folks will just hold out for a few years, about the length of time it takes for a child to know right from wrong.

I'm not sure that we can easily transfer the political specificity of this promise to those we perceive to be our enemies today, but the more important promise is of Immanuel—God with us. And notice something about that: Ahaz doesn't want to hear it.

There is a way in which God's presence can feel an awful lot like bad news to us before it feels like good news. Because while God's presence is pure gift, it is a gift that calls us into obligations, as well. When we know that God is with us, there are certain things we do that we might not otherwise. For Ahaz, God's presence brings deliverance from these enemies, but also calls him to institute justice. The prophets make it clear, over and over, that the point of political power is to establish justice for the poor and the vulnerable. Literally any other use, except perhaps encouraging right worship, is an abuse of power. God with us, in political terms, is both promise and call.

But the other difficulty of God with us is that it is always easier to worry than it is to trust. The saccharine pleasure of the paralysis of despair is that it gives us permission to do nothing. Trust in God's presence elicits hope, which always calls us to difficult work. This perhaps can crowbar us over to Joseph. I want to see Joseph today as a man who had made perfectly blameless, normal plans for his life, in cooperation with an extraordinary young woman. I want you to see him as a guy who does honest work, treats people well, and is taking prudent steps to live a normal, virtuous life. For Joseph, God with us is at first a catastrophe. It completely disrupts his good, virtuous plans.

This is something that we don't think about very often. We assume that if we aren't directly doing something morally blame-worthy, we must be directly in stream with the movement of God's Spirit. I don't want to overestimate his heroism, but by every moral code he knew, Joseph's plan to divorce (for that's what the Greek word actually means) Mary quietly is a good and moral decision. Just give Joseph's heartbreak a moment. I think the evidence suggests that we should give him the benefit of the doubt and credit him with real love for Mary. The fact that the text doesn't show him going berserk doesn't mean that Mary's apparent infidelity wasn't a disaster for him—hearts break in all kinds of ways.

I have had a time in my life when all the careful, relatively harmless plans I had made for my life went horribly awry because of someone else's actions, and it is the worst I've ever felt. And there, in that moment, when your life is a scorched earth, when the future is empty, obscure, and hostile—God is there. That's where Joseph is midway through today's gospel reading, and God is with him. But again, notice, God's absence might have been easier. The angel asks him to believe the impossible and God's presence calls him to reorient his whole life to be stepfather to the Messiah.

It is a huge risk to believe the promise that our God is a God who is with us. I don't deny it for a moment. But if we really talk about it, I am confident that I am not the only one here who will attest that the promise is true. Emanuel does not make our lives exactly the way that we might want them to be. It calls us to astonishing audacity in what we hope, against all odds. And it rather insists that if God is with us, we ought to act like it by following Jesus in putting our lives on the line for those whose lives are threatened by our society's way of being together. But it is the most radical, sharp-edged comfort; the greatest and surest promise; the most outlandish, demanding hope. Our God is a god who is always with us. Amen.