

READINGS

Isaiah 7:10-17	OT
Matthew 1:18-25	NT

Preparing the Way 4

Finally in the last week of Advent we hear a prophecy that seems to link to our Christmas story. This week the scriptures turn our attention to Joseph as we discover the significance of the name given in Isaiah's prophecy, and ascribed to Jesus by Matthew - Immanuel. The idea that God is with us may seem commonplace because we have heard it over and over. But for the ancient hearers of the Gospel, it would have sounded radical, or even scandalous.

And what about for those who lived the story?

This week I have decided to share a reflection from the "Gathering" written by Janice Young, former president of B.C. conference and currently ministering in Seschelt.

"It's amazing, frightening really, how quickly life can turn around. Joseph's life had been turned upside down in an instant, with just three words. Until two weeks ago he had been the happiest man in Nazareth. He was engaged to Mary - a beautiful, vibrant, kind, woman. Both of their families seemed pleased with the match. On top of that, his carpentry business was flourishing. Until two weeks ago, he had been humming songs of praise as he worked on various pieces of furniture. As he hummed, he day-dreamed and prayed for a day in the future, maybe in a dozen years or so, God willing, when he would begin to teach his son the skills of his trade.

And then two weeks ago, Mary spoke those words that changed his prayer into lament and his daydream into a nightmare. "I am pregnant," she told him. Joseph knew that Mary's child wasn't his. But he didn't know who the father was. When he asked Mary, she wouldn't tell him. She asked him to trust her. She asked him to trust that God would make everything work out.

How do you trust when trust has been broken? That was just one of the questions that kept Joseph awake at night. Every night for the past two weeks sleep had eluded him. As soon as he closed his eyes, the questions and the conflicting emotions swirled in his mind. He tossed and turned throughout the night as he considered his options.

Because Mary was carrying someone else's child, Joseph was obligated by the law to dismiss her. He wanted to get even. If he knew who the father was, Joseph would see that the no-good scoundrel got what was coming to him. He considered telling his next door neighbour, the town gossip, that Mary had cheated on him. He could imagine his neighbour, at sunrise, standing at the well in the town centre whispering in the ears of all the women as they came for water. By mid-morning, Mary's reputation would be in tatters. By mid-morning Mary and maybe even her guilty lover would be dragged to the gates of the town for sentencing. What if someone decided that Mary should be punished according to the law of Moses? What if someone threw a stone and hit her as the law demanded? What if others followed suit? By noon, Mary could be lying in a broken and bloody heap - dust to dust, ashes to ashes. No, as upset as he was, Joseph couldn't let that happen to Mary. His churning stomach helped him realize that he loved her deeply.

But what could he do? Even though his heart was breaking, he couldn't bear to see Mary hurt. Maybe he would just break the engagement quietly. He didn't have to tell anyone the reason. Yeah, that's what he would do. He wouldn't humiliate her or expose her to a public stoning. He would do what he could to protect her. He tried not to think about what would happen when Mary's belly started to swell. But in the dead of night he kept seeing her standing alone, using her bare hands to try to deflect the rocks being hurled at her. Joseph kept tossing and turning all night long. The next morning he was so tired his eyes stung as if he had been in a sandstorm. In the middle of the day, he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, so he sat on his bench in the shade of a tree and immediately fell asleep and began to dream.

In his dream, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and spoke. He couldn't really see the angel. It was bathed in a beautiful light. But he heard every word when the angel spoke in a voice of calm and gentle authority: "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child being knit together in Mary's womb is God's child. This child is God's gift to you and Mary and the whole world. Joseph, God needs you to love this child as your own son. This child needs your love and devotion. He needs the example of your obedience and faithfulness. He needs you to name him Jesus - God saves. He needs you to claim him as part of your family, for you come from a long line of faithful decedents who have known God's steadfast love in difficult circumstances. Your family, like every family, has known tragedy and brokenness and sin. Your family, like every family, needs to know the forgiving, healing love of God. Joseph, Mary's child will help you to know God's love in a way you have never known before. Joseph, you need this child in your life. Joseph, Mary needs you. Her baby needs you. God needs you. Don't be afraid. God will give you the strength and wisdom to do the right thing."

Joseph woke with a start and he knew what he would do. he went back to work, but not on the shelves he had been making for a customer. Instead he chose some fine olive wood and began cutting narrow strips that he would fashion into a cradle - a cradle for his son, Jesus. As he worked, he began to hum.”

Joseph’s vision and Isaiah’s prophecy reflect an intense longing within God for relationship with humanity. Joseph’s love and care for Mary becomes a metaphor for the love of God for us, and the God’s desire for us to live that love for one another. The presence of God in the darkest of moments is palpable in this story. It is the reminder we hear in our Advent creed God is God in darkness and light. It is the hearing of the angel voices in the midst of personal disaster. It is the dream and vision of God’s hope, peace, joy and love we long for every day of our lives.

As you reflect on the love of Joseph listen to the calling of spirit of the angel voices around you today. Who are you to love more deeply? Who are you to carry the message of emmanuel to this day?

Christmas Comes

Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.

The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem or in Times Square,
For Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way to Jerusalem -
Determinedly, inevitable...

Even now it comes

In the face of hatred and warring -

No atrocity too terrible to stop it,

No Herod strong enough,

No hurt deep enough, No curse shocking enough,

No disaster shattering enough -

For someone on earth will see the star

Someone will hear the angel voices,

Someone will run to Bethlehem,

Someone will know peace and goodwill:

The Christ will be born!¹

¹ Ann Weems. Christmas Comes “Reaching for Rainbows”