

Ken Overberg, S.J.

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec 22, 2019

Given the richness of the season and of our readings, my introduction is longer today.

As we begin telling the Christmas story, it may be helpful to remember that the Infancy Narratives are stories of faith, not biographies or exact histories. The first gospel, Mark, does not even mention the birth of Jesus. Only Matthew and Luke have birth stories, and these stories are very different (even if we have blended them in song and creche). So we need not ask: did it happen this way? Instead we ask: what is the meaning of the story?

Scripture scholar Ray Brown never tired of saying that the Infancy Narratives present the Gospel in miniature. The stories give us the identity of Jesus—Son of David (that is, a descendant of David who would be the Messiah) and Son of God. They establish a bridge between Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures. They remind us that some people accepted Jesus and some rejected him.

In telling their stories, the early Christians found light in the Hebrew Scriptures. So, for example, today's first reading from Isaiah was especially helpful. Isaiah exercised his prophetic ministry in and around Jerusalem, from about 742 B.C.E. to 701 (or maybe beyond). These were terrible times of war and devastation. Assyria, the superpower of the time, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and destroyed much of the southern kingdom. Jerusalem survived.

It is very important to remember that a prophet is one who reads the signs of the times in light of the covenant relationship between God and the people. The prophet does not foretell the future. The Hebrew prophets often interacted with their kings. Isaiah challenged both Ahaz and Hezekiah, who rejected his political advice rooted in his theological convictions about radical trust in the help and protection of the God of Israel.

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah speaks to Ahaz, king of Judah. Urging trust in God in the midst of a threatening political crisis, Isaiah speaks of a child to be born as a sign from God. Isaiah, of course, was not talking about Jesus, but about an event of his day (more than 700 years before Jesus' birth). Scholars suggest that the young woman (that's what the Hebrew word means, not virgin) is probably the wife of Ahaz. Their child will guarantee the dynasty's future; and since this is the "house of David," the child is called Immanuel, recalling God's promises to David. (Isaiah's trust in God was closely linked to the Davidic king.) Centuries later in the Greek translation of the Hebrew, the word for virgin was used in place of young woman. Still later, early Christians, including Matthew, would use this translation.

Our other readings, the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Romans and the gospel from Matthew, announce in statement and in story the identity of Jesus as Son of David and Son of God. If we listen carefully to Paul, we will hear that Paul links Jesus as Son of God to the resurrection. Given the transforming power of this experience, it is not surprising that early Jesus followers focused on resurrection. Decades after Paul, when Matthew's gospel was written, the conviction and proclamation about Jesus' identity as Son of God is pushed back to his

conception. Still later in John's magnificent prologue to his gospel, the Word is with God, is God, before creation.

In today's gospel we hear the other annunciation story, the one to Joseph. The annunciation more familiar to us is from Luke, who focuses on Mary. Matthew however develops his story around Joseph.

Let's listen to God's word!

\*\*\*\*\*

As daily darkness lengthens in the North, the Church invites us into the light. As holiday preparations become more stressful, the Church invites us into peaceful prayer. It is Advent.

These days are the darkest days of the year for us in the North. We experience lots of other darkness too—physical, mental, and spiritual illness; political and religious polarization; violence of all kinds.

Into all this darkness comes a light, a word of hope and life: Emmanuel!

“With us is God”—what a remarkable conviction! The great and gracious God is here in our midst—now in Word and Sacrament, in this assembly. The God of all creation is in the depths of our being—each of us an image of God. The God of tender mercies is enfleshed in a unique and definitive way in Jesus, Son of David and Son of God. Jesus is light for our path, leading us to the fullness of life, in compassion and forgiveness, justice and nonviolence, trust and love. God is with us.

In the midst of personal and global struggles, we gather again to tell our wonder-ful story. We can be people of hope, just like Isaiah, Paul, Mary and Joseph, because past, present, and future, God comes to save us, strengthening our hearts with abundant love. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, what are your dreams? Where do you find Emmanuel in your life?