

Advent IV Year A

“...and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.”

In the beginning our God in imaginative reverie patterned the sun, the moon and the stars in the heavens to rule the earth, the sun by day; the moon and the stars by night as the writer of Genesis puts it; and later in Exodus after the people Israel flee the pharaoh in Egypt into the Sinai desert God quite astoundingly descends from the heavens to the mountaintops. You know the story of Moses climbing up and down the mountain in the Sinai wilderness (six times if you're counting)...climbing the mountain to encounter God... God closer now; and then even more astounding, upon leaving the mountain, God descends into the very camp, carried in the ark amidst a people... a story, a grand mythology of Emmanuel, God with us.

Indeed the whole of scripture, Hebrew scripture and New Testament literature, are the stories of God inhabiting a people throughout their history. The sole purpose of the prophets and sages of scripture is to speculate and proclaim how it is that God is among us. In light of major historical shifts over the course of Israel's history, from scandal to scandal, from crisis to crisis, the writers of sacred lore speak on behalf of their people as to how it is that God is with us. In the desert God resides in the ark in the tent of meeting...God feeds and protects this improbable community in their sojourn in the desert wilderness....God continues

among the people upon entry into the land of Canaan, the promised land, God delivering on the promise made to Abraham....Joshua the one anointed as God's chosen leader, Yeshua in the Hebrew which means 'God saves'....and then the monarchy, a king and a temple...the king now God's anointed to lead God's people....the Temple God's dwelling place in the heart of the people...and Isaiah's account of the birth of Hezekiah, the boy king (and a little child shall lead them) ascending the throne after the murder of his father...the boy king who will save God's chosen people....and then exile, the monarchy destroyed, the people deported, and it is Cyrus the king of Persia who Isaiah calls the messiah the anointed one to bring Israel home....and then the Hasmonean dynasty who restored Israel's sovereignty from the Assyrians in the second century B.C.E..... 'arise O Judah and rejoice in Zion', we read in Maccabees about this improbable restoration of Judea....only to see the coming of the Roman legions in the first century B.C.E....Israel occupied now by empire....And so where now, in the sweep of Israel's history, is this God with us? It seems that God makes God's appearance in the midst of crisis, even in the midst of scandal.... Crisis and scandal, perhaps rudiments of the pattern, rudiments of the process of God's coming.

Matthew now in today's Gospel has taken up the pen to ponder this time worn question: How is it that God is with us? But Matthew does not look to the palaces and powers of the day for a monarch, a great ruler to set right the affairs of

earth...instead he looks to the margins of society. He looks to the often unapprehended periphery...an unwed pregnant girl....she who will bear the child called Emanuel....a child called God with us, Matthew is quoting Isaiah here...Isaiah speaking of the boy king Hezekiah.... But Matthew recognizing the pattern of “God with us”....Jesus of the pattern...a pattern of salvation that has run in and through Israel’s history, so Matthew names the pattern....Emmanuel from the sixth century....and his name shall be Ιησους in the Greek, from which we get Jesus....and in the Hebrew, Yeshua, the same name of he who fought the battle of Jericho a millennium in the past....Matthew grounding this birth in the history and lore of his people.....This child to come will be a renewal of the pattern of God with us in earth. So the entire Gospel of Matthew is to name what this pattern looks like represented in the person of Jesus and those who follow him.

Matthew teaches us in this gospel how to recognize the pattern, the same pattern that set the sun, the moon and the stars in the beginning. What do you see Jesus asks his disciples? We see the dead raised; the sick are healed, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed....the shamed given dignity...justice rendered....freedom engendered...love set loose....the pattern of salvation is what we see...God with us....not the old bearded patriarch of the deists aloof in the heavens; or the unmoved mover of the Greeks...but love alive.... love with us....a profound and prolific advent into the created order restoring, setting free God’s

people from the slavery of sin..... setting us free from fear...setting us free from that which impedes the pattern.

One of the matriarchs of Nativity Dothan, my home parish... was Agnes Simpson.... Agnes' first husband was a gentleman farmer... owned about half of Henry County, people said... One day Mr. Dowling, her husband, was plowing a field and his tractor overturned crushing him underneath, killing him instantly.... Agnes grieved for years until she met a married doctor... they had an affair... his marriage broke up and he and Agnes got married... This was in the nineteen fifties when people were excommunicated if they divorced and remarried.... So Agnes at the direction of the bishop was told that she couldn't receive communion for a year.... Agnes sang in the choir... and each Sunday at communion she would stand dutifully in the sacristy while others ate and drank the sacrament... I can only imagine how humiliating that must have been... a few years later it was Agnes who financed the construction of a new church building... and it was always Agnes over the years who we turned to for the historical context and perspective to inform the major decisions made for the parish.

Twenty five years later Agnes' daughter gave birth to a son... she was unmarried... we never knew who the father was.... The boy was named Zachary... he was chubby and redheaded, and freckled face... he was always larger than his peers... and clumsy... he got teased a lot... but he was a part of us... a citizen of

God's kingdom.... The first year I was here in Mobile, I got a call from Zachary's mother (Agnes' daughter) Zachary was in school at the Alabama School for Math and Science... she was distraught... Zachary had been caught after hours making out with another student... that is of course against the rules, and he was going to be expelled. I went to talk to the dean of students. I tried to convince him to give Zachary another chance, but rules were rules.... Zachary was one of the top students in the class, and the dean agreed to see if he could recommend a transfer to Auburn University... where he could finish up the last few requirements to graduate from high school, while beginning his freshman year of college... Zachary now teaches economics at Boston University.

What I'm trying to say is that God has a tendency to show up amid scandal and crisis... God is, dare I say, unscrupulous in the way God loves the world. Matthew is making the audacious claim that not only does God's love arrive on the margins of the human community, but amid scandal. It is as if the seams of the created order must be pulled at... stretched apart, to let in the light.... It is like birth...that new life always comes through pain.... And this journey we call life is a series, a pattern, of death and rebirth.... Of breaking and mending... and our call is to be present to each other... to always honor the humanity of each other, no matter the crisis, no matter the scandal.... It is for us to be steadfast in love for

each other... as God is steadfast in love for us...It is in our steadfastness in love that God's grace is imparted... that is the essence of the pattern of God with us.

So the pattern of God with us depends on our choices... and Jesus is the pattern we follow... One who is steadfast in love, even unto death.... A pattern of inclusion and embrace, a pattern of mercy and kindness... a pattern of welcoming the stranger... breaking bread with outcasts... the pattern is a process that is ever unfolding.... Always new circumstances... but always the pattern... steadfast in love.

.... The truth of the matter is that in the Gospels we can never separate Christ from the church...there is no Jesus without the movement he begot....the figure of the Christ represents the new Israel with God in her midst....the church the body of Christ set about a sacred process of salvation....and we know it is true because we know the pattern, through experience and practice, and word and sacrament. God is with us in the practice and process of love....And there are signs along the way: the blind see...the lame walk...the walking dead are raised, given dignity...there is mercy with this God....there is kindness and compassion with this God.....there is justice and peace with this God who is with us....Emmanuel, a pattern of truth...a process, a pattern of love in the flesh.

Joseph in our narrative this morning is the church...He is challenged to trust the signs, trust the pattern...trust the process that begins on the margins of life

amid doubt and fear and scandal, a pregnant fiancé, who his world says to put away...He is in the dark night of the soul, wherein faith is fragile and tenuous...And his choice is to be steadfast in trust... steadfast in love....When the angel comes to us in the dark and speaks of trustwhen the angel comes and says fear not, trust... trust the truth of our humanity and that of the other... trust this truth that flies in the face of convention....When the angel comes, Let us say yes....yes to the pattern...Let us as a renewed people become the Christ for the world we are meant to be....we'll know it to be the truth because we know the signs...we know it to be the truth because we recognize the pattern...the process of God with us....Let us be the love for the world that God calls us to be....Fear not...the Advent of God is always at hand, and we bear our God to the world as a sure and sacred hope....We my brothers and sisters are God's Advent in the flesh....Christ's coming depends on the steadfast love we bear....We are Advent people...Trusting Fathers and life-bearing Mothers of the light casting the pattern of compassion, kindness and mercy and justice into the darkness of our world. Bear this light with joy, because this is the one and only thing for us....Dear people of God, our God has left the heavens; our God has descended from the mountaintops and comes as we speak to dwell among us...God with us and we with God....An Advent so close at hand....a new day, a new age, a new hope.