

4th Sunday of Advent

A woman told me, “My daughter just got engaged, and I was not happy about it. I knew I shouldn’t be upset, but I was. Then she told me the name of her fiancé, and I realized that he had the same name as my deceased husband. I took this as a sign that everything was going to be all right.”

People look for signs when they feel lost, when they don’t know what important choice to make, or when they wonder if someone is in heaven. They want a sign showing them what to do or reassuring them that everything will be all right. We have all experienced God in extraordinary ways, so at times we ask God to reveal himself in extraordinary ways again.

Isaiah the prophet thought Ahaz the King was about to make a terrible decision. Ahaz wanted a military alliance with Assyria. Isaiah realized that Ahaz wasn’t listening to him, so he said, “Ask for a sign from the Lord your God; let it be deep as the netherworld or high as the sky!” Ahaz refused, probably because he had already made up his mind. Isaiah, exasperated, said, “the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” Isaiah was probably referring to a woman who was alive at that time, who would conceive a son of King Ahaz as a sign that his dynasty would continue in spite of his bad decisions.

Matthew put that prophecy in his gospel because it has a deeper meaning for Christians. For us Isaiah’s virgin foreshadows the virgin Mary, and Emmanuel foreshadows Jesus. Ahaz got a sign that God would remain faithful, even though the people had sinned, and we got a sign that God would remain faithful in spite of our sins. We call Jesus “Emmanuel” in many of the hymns of Advent. He is a sign of our hope. Matthew explains that the name Emmanuel means “God is with us.” One of my seminary professors said that he thought those four words summed up the entire bible: “God is with us.” From the creation of the world to the prophets of old to the coming of Christ to the second coming of Christ, the message that the bible announces again and again is “God is with us.”

During this last week of Advent the church has a traditional series of daily prayers called the “O Antiphons” because they all address Christ under one of his titles: “O Wisdom, O sacred Lord, O Flower of Jesse’s stem, O Key of David, O Radiant Dawn, O King of all the nations, O Emmanuel.” In Latin the words are *Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, Emmanuel*. If you take the first letter of those 7 words and spell them backwards, you get the two Latin words *Ero cras*, which mean “I will be there tomorrow.” Seven times we call out to Christ to enter our lives, to give us a sign, and at the end of seven nights he responds back to us that he has been listening: *Ero cras*, “I will be there tomorrow.”

Sometimes we do not have to look very hard for a sign from God. Sometimes he arranges to come to us in very simple ways - in someone’s name or in your celebration of Christmas. If you are asking God for a sign because of something disturbing or unclear in your life, God wishes to reassure you with the same message that appears again and again in the bible: Emmanuel. God is with us. During Advent God hears our anxious prayers and says to us, “I will be there tomorrow,” and every tomorrow to come.

Sunday, December 18, 2016