

December 22, 2019 - Advent 4A

“Dreaming of Peace and Grace” - Rev. Seth D Jones

Scripture: Isaiah 7, Matthew 1

Last week, we spoke of the Really Real, that experience of the dreamtime seeming more real than the dayworld. A lot of what I said last week was mystical and deep and high-flying. My hope, though, was, and is, to provide an alternative perspective to how we hear these stories with which we are so familiar. Sometimes, it is good to just retell the simple story. But other times, it is important to break out of the ruts of familiar thinking about these stories, especially now.

I believe we are living through a time when our usual and standard interpretations of everything - our faith, our politics, our views of the world, our relationships - are all being radically altered and reshaped by vast and massive forces acting in the world today. We are in an in-between time, a time when the ways of the world are shifting away from the way things used to be.

When these shifts happen, especially on a global level, the definitions and meanings of ideas dissolve, reform, and regenerate in new ways. These massive shifts have historical precedents and some are better recorded than others.

The shift from scrounging and hunting for food to fire about a million years ago, and then agriculture about 30,000 years ago, are shifts that are shrouded in mystery, but the ability to cook the food we hunted and grow the food we needed led to the building of cities and trade routes. People can settle in one place when they don't have to follow animals migrating.

The shift from shaping stones to melting metals created the ability to dominate other cultures and civilizations with weapons of war.

The shift from oral traditions to written accounts of myth and philosophy and history about 2500 years ago, which was witnessed by Socrates (and documented by Plato), changed how we communicate and understand myth, history, and philosophy, a shift which gave rise to such ideas like democracy and science.

The shift from limited information housed in cathedrals and libraries run by monks who laboriously copied manuscripts to the printing press literally made the world go insane. I don't think it is a coincidence that the rise of nation-states was happening at this time as well. Remember, the first mass produced text in the world was Luther's 95 Theses in 1517.

The industrial age was a slower shift, but equally disruptive as people moved from farms to cities to work in factories.

But the really big shift we are going through right now will be looked upon in the future as one of the great transitions of the human being. We are almost 30 years into the introduction of the Internet to the world. In August of 1991, the World Wide Web became available to the world, in August of 1994 the Netscape browser came online, and by 1995 millions of people had signed on to the WWW, tolerating the clicking, whining sounds of their modem hooking up to bulletin boards and 8-bit animation on primitive websites run by news agencies, conspiracy theorists, and music pirates.

30 years into the World Wide Web, the definitions of everything are deconstructing. The ways we understand the world no longer work, and we can't go back again. Kalahari Bushmen use cell phones and the internet to communicate with one another while living like their ancestors did for 10s of thousands of years. The change is wholesale, permanent and global.

These in-between times are difficult to navigate. Some of us are drawn to reinforce old ways of being, thinking that the old patterns and definitions will somehow fix the perceived problems of the new world we are all moving into now. Some of us embrace the continuing deconstruction and seek opportunities to make accelerate that deconstruction. Many of us want to force and reinforce our own definitions and perceptions of the truth so that we will be assured that at least we were either with those who were 'right' or those who were powerful. We want to be on the 'right side' of history.

But in the in-between, in the transitions of empires and cultures and histories and technologies, it becomes very clear that it is individuals and their personal experiences that accumulate and drive the future. It becomes clear that you and I create the future.

What then is your dream of the future?

In the story of Ahaz from Isaiah, we see a king given the powerful opportunity to be guided by God directly. Ahaz has an opportunity to dream of a future with God. Ahaz is a corrupt king who has made deals with the Assyrian Empire, defying the tradition of his Hebrew predecessors.

The Lord says to King Ahaz,

*"Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."* (vs 10).

How often does this happen?

This is an Extraordinary Spiritual Encounter (ESE), a visit from God. It happens often enough in the Bible, but how often does it happen in our world?

I suspect it happens more often than we think. Many of us are walking around with stories of Extraordinary Spiritual Encounters. Here, in the Book of Isaiah, an entire nation could be influenced by this one person's encounter with God. But Ahaz says no, because he has already made a back-door deal with Tilgar-Pileser III (745-727 BCE), the ruler of the Assyrian empire. Ahaz was famous for selling off the riches of the Jerusalem Temple to the Assyrians and placing an altar to the Assyrian gods in the Temple. He is the example of the height of idolatry. Ahaz shares the dreams of the Assyrian emperor - the dreams of a future of war and destruction and victory.

And so his response to God's offer to receive a sign, to this Extraordinary Spiritual Encounter, is to say,  
*"No thanks."*

And so Isaiah speaks to Ahaz on God's behalf, telling him,  
*"Well, the world is changing and everything you think you know will vanish because someone is coming who will be Immanuel, the very presence of God among the people"* (vs 15).

Prophecy, remember, is the speaking of truth into a present situation, a truth which also affects and impacts the future. Prophecy is the Really Real speaking to the real world about what is happening beneath and around the perceived reality of the people. Prophecy is a dream that erupts into the dayworld and begins to influence and manifest itself in history.

And this is why these verses from Isaiah stood out to Matthew as he retold the story of Jesus' birth. Matthew is terse and journalistic about the birth story. He tells it in 7 verses and so we get a preview to Tuesday night in our reading this morning. In this story, in this in-between time for the history of Israel, 700 years later from Isaiah's words to Ahaz, we see a very different response to the Extraordinary Spiritual Encounter.

When you read 'engagement' of couples in Scripture, you need to think transactions and arranged marriages, not what we mean by engagement. Joseph was arranged by his father to marry Mary long before this moment. Joseph is probably a young man, 17-20, because he still hasn't taken Mary into his home to complete and consummate the marriage. This is done once the father or family decides it is time. But Joseph is close to that time.

It turns out, though, that Mary is already pregnant. She is probably also young - the average age of marriage for a woman in that day and age was around 14-16. And then we read,

*“Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (vs 19).*

Let me paraphrase this for you:

*“Joseph, being a man who knew the law well (righteous), and not wanting to be responsible for the death of a young unmarried pregnant girl (since stoning is the sentence for a girl in Mary’s situation), decided to divorce her quietly by way of a quiet conversation with his rabbi, under the sanction and tradition of Jewish law.”*

Put this way, this story sounds much more like real life, doesn’t it? Young people in difficult situations with no real way to manage or understand how to navigate these things, except by relying on what their parents and tradition tell them to do. Imagine the difficulties here for Joseph and Mary - the doubt that Joseph must experience. Perhaps he feels betrayed. Mary does not figure prominently in Matthew’s story, but it would be hard to imagine she is not consumed with fear and anxiety about her future.

God, though, doesn’t play by our rules. And when God is with us, our dreams of the future and how we understand the future changes radically. Sometimes, by our own willpower and thought, we can see a pathway through that makes everything at least manageable. More often, we just rely on what we know and that reliance conforms us to the people around us and the expectations of the world that surrounds us.

But an Extraordinary Spiritual Encounter changes all that. Because after this encounter, Joseph is no longer a righteous man according to tradition. The tradition demands Joseph divorce Mary. It is the righteous thing to do.

In the Bible, angels only show up when great and tremendous and historic change is about to take place. Angels are the flag-bearers of the in-between, the heralds of the dissolving and reformation of civilizations and individuals alike, the leaders into the vast unknown where futures are no longer predictable or definable by what has gone before. They always appear to a single individual, virtually never to a group of people, even if their message will influence whole nations. And I think it is really, really important to remember what the universal response to the presence of angels always is. Do you know?

Fear.

Because angels are fearful and terrifying creations of God. This is why, whenever they show up, they say the same thing by way of introduction.

Angels always say,  
*“Do not be afraid.”*

And that is also true today in Matthew’s Gospel. An angel shows up in Joseph’s dreams. Or to put it another way, from my teacher at Luther Seminary,  
*“...let’s keep in mind it takes a visit from an angel to calm all this down and orient Joseph to God’s intentions.”<sup>1</sup>*

An agent, an ambassador of the Really Real, shows up and tells Joseph,  
*“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. You will name the son Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”* (vs 20-21).

The name, Jesus, by the way, is a Hellenized version of *Yeshua*, which in Hebrew can be translated to either Joshua or Isaiah, which means *“God saves”*. Naming matters in Scripture, and the connection between the great warrior and leader **Joshua**, in the sixth book of the Bible, who saved and secured the land of Israel for the Hebrew people, the great prophet **Isaiah** who promised salvation during exile to God’s people, and the One who will save the world from sin and death, **Jesus**, is deeply intentional.

Why, then, you might ask, isn’t Jesus’ name *Immanuel*? I mean, that is what the prophet said, isn’t it? That his name will be Immanuel? I think it is because the name Immanuel mirrors an action, rather than a name, and the way Jesus is throughout the Gospel of Matthew is the embodiment and enacting of what *“God with us”* really means. After all, the last words in the Gospel of Matthew reinforce the beginning we read today:  
*“And remember, I will be with you always, to the end of the age”* (Mt 28:20).

Joseph awakens from his Extraordinary Spiritual Encounter and, as Matthew tells us,  
*he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him* (vs 24).

Whereas Ahaz dreams of war and victory and power, Joseph dreams of peace and grace. He takes Mary as his wife and brings Jesus into the world as his very own. By doing so, Joseph likely becomes unrighteous in the eyes of the faith. He becomes willing to expose himself to public disgrace. He takes this on for Mary’s sake...in much the same way Jesus takes on unrighteousness and public disgrace for Barrabas’ sake in Matthew 27. Joseph enacts grace for the sake of Mary’s peace and future. We are called to follow those dreams of Joseph as well. Do not be afraid of the dreams of grace and peace that the angels of the Lord have for you. Sometimes, the visitation of angels and the dreams they bring to us change the history of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> from “A God Really With Us” by David Lose. <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/>. Accessed 12/20/19.

So, what does it mean that God is with us?

It means that two people, Mary and Joseph, took seriously their Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences and allowed themselves to be completely changed by them.

God with us means dreaming of grace and peace and love and joy, rather than dreaming of war and victory and power and idolatrous alliances.

God with us looks like Joseph staying with the mother of God's child.

God with us looks like Jesus Christ in his birth, life, death and resurrection.

Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us.

Really with us.

Amen.