

December 18, 2016
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Sermon - "God is With Us"

How many of you, please raise your hand, have had life turn out exactly as you planned?

Not too many.

Life rarely follows our specific directions, just as God rarely answers our prayers exactly as we request them.

Walter Bruggeman suggests that "God will recruit as necessary from the human cast in order to reorder human history."

In the case of the incarnation – God made flesh – God chose Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth.

Matthew starts his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus which tells us that "all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations."

Joseph, the husband of Mary, is the one who can trace his ancestry all the way back to Abraham.

One commentator describes the genealogy as "a story of God's "providence": "Gentiles being welcomed, sinners being changed, transgressions nurturing transformation, fear fueling courage."

This ancestry is replete with intriguing stories of people who made mistakes and recovered; people who heard God's call and responded.

It is a story of God's love carried out through people no different than you and I.

From the very beginning of time – when God breathed us into being – God has remained with us.

Jesus, Emmanuel, reminds us that God's presence is a permanent part of who we are.

It seems almost trite and superfluous to say that the incarnation is the greatest statement, the greatest manifestation of love ever – but that doesn't make it untrue.

The name Emmanuel – God with us – is a profound and powerful statement of God's desire to be in intimate communion with human beings.

The challenge for us is to recognize God's presence in all situations and circumstances.

We can doubt God's love in times of grief, pain and trauma, but we find comfort, healing and strength when we are able to experience God's "with-us-ness" even in such times.

And, when we are able to help others to recognize and experience God's presence and love in their lives – whatever they may be going through – then we have truly become Advent people.

In this morning's passage Joseph, is identified as a "righteous man."

What does that mean to you?

Dictionary.com says "morally right or justifiable; acting in an upright, moral way; virtuous."

The bible dictionary defines it as 'the state of being in the right, or being vindicated, noting that the roots of the word 'righteousness' appear over five hundred times in the Old Testament and over two hundred twenty five times in the New Testament.

Obviously, this is an aspect of human nature that is important to our biblical ancestors.

Who is righteous?

Is it the person who follows all the rules?

Or is it the person who strives to always do the right thing?

Is it a measure of compassion or obedience?

There are so many unknowns in Matthew's short account of Jesus' birth.

We don't know how Mary was 'found to be with child' or what transpired between her and Joseph.

We don't know how long Joseph labored over his decision to 'dismiss her quietly.'

What we do know is that after Joseph had made up his mind to do what he thought was right and compassionate, 'an angel of the Lord spoke to him in a dream' and told him to take another course of action.

How many times in our lives do we make decisions to do one thing, only to find shifting circumstances, varying emotions, or new information prompting us to change our mind?

The gospel story tells us that this is ok.

We can adapt.

We can adjust.

We can go back on a promise we have made and God will be right there.

God-with-us is 24/7.

God-with-us lets us know that sometimes the rules of law get overridden by the rules of compassion.

Advent is a perfect time of year for us to explore this concept.

Christmas is holiday loaded with expectations.

We expect people to act a certain way.

We expect to receive thoughtful gifts.

We expect to be joyful.

We even expect it to snow!

I have come to understand that our own expectations are perhaps one of the most burdensome things we carry.

Disappointment in unmet expectations is often at the root of anger and animosity.

When we expect someone to act in a certain way, whether it is our spouse, our child, our neighbor... our pastor, our president, Santa Claus or God, we are disappointed and dismayed when they don't.

This disappointment often manifests as anger or what some would perceive as righteousness.

Rather than building up expectations and resentments, why not learn from Joseph and meet each day as it comes.

Joseph and Mary can not have had an easy time with their situation but as far as we are told, they listened to God, followed God's will and faced each day with the confidence that God was with them and would guide them on their journey.

From Nazareth to Bethlehem to Egypt to Jerusalem to Calvary, this holy family followed God's direction for their lives.

They listened to the angels.

They paid attention to their dreams.

They said 'yes' to God and lived out the greatest miracle of all time.

What expectations are you harboring for this holiday?

What might you release to God?

On this fourth Sunday of Advent we celebrate love.

Love that begins, continues, ends and changes all things.

Let us go out into this week before Christmas with love in our hearts, leaving the miracles to God and expecting only that we will be transformed, made anew by God-with-us.