

Advent 4: God With Us. Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18;  
Dale Ramerman

Good Morning on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday of the season of expectation and anticipation.

But as well as celebrating, I wonder if we are ready to deal with the disappointments?

For the Holy family, according to the Gospel of Matthew's account of the birth of the Christ, Christ's birth was quickly followed by disappointment, the turmoil of an unexpected flight into a foreign land, making the Holy Family the first century equivalent of 20<sup>th</sup> century refugees. Yes, they were undocumented aliens seeking asylum. Surely, that was not what Mary and Joseph hoped for their first child.

Don't most of our anticipated celebrations, if we're honest about it, have some degree of disappointment, whether it's a family member who does not show, or who causes conflict. Or perhaps it is an overcooked turkey, or a present you've given or received. I recall a Christmas gift from my parents, something I had no interest in. I did my best to sound thankful, but ever after, I've worried that they sensed my disappointment and lack of gratitude.

And the Christmas story. We have two Christmas stories, quite different in detail. One is in the Gospel of Matthew, which we read today. The other story is in the Gospel of Luke. Did you notice in our readings from Isaiah, the reference to the birth of a child to a young woman who named her son Immanuel, and our Gospel reading quoting that same Isaiah passage as saying that a Virgin would conceive, bear a son, and name him Emmanuel? Was she a virgin or not?

The significant fact about the woman in the Isaiah prophecy is not who she was (we do not know her name), or her sexual history. Rather, it was her exemplary faith in God for the future of the land of Judah, in contrast to the hopelessness of King Ahaz who anticipated defeat by the Assyrian army. The faith of this young mother is reflected in her naming the child Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us."

The Gospel of Matthew (in fact, all of the gospels) were written, using the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Greek Septuagint translates the Isaiah passage as "virgin shall give birth". I recall in the early 1950's a Time Magazine article about the recently published New Revised Standard translation. The article proclaimed, as only Time Magazine could, that the Bible had been rewritten. And our pastor warned that changing the Isaiah passage from a virgin giving birth to a young woman giving birth was yet another Communist plot to undercut Christianity.

The changing in the Gospels of the phrase "a young woman shall give birth" to "a virgin giving birth," has resulted, I fear, in an emphasis on Mary's sexual history as a virgin, rather than Mary's faithfulness, as reflected in the Magnificat found in Luke chapter 1.

And then there are the modern day scare mongers proclaiming a plot to secularize, destroy or steal Christmas. Christmas indeed has been highly secularized, but aren't we all complicit in that? I know how many Amazon deliveries have come to our door in the past two weeks. On the other hand, not proclaiming "Merry Christmas" to everyone, dismissed as mere political correctness by the kooks of the TV channel that shall remain unnamed, can reflect a degree of thoughtfulness and sensitivity that is badly needed in a diverse society. Staffing the Salvation Army kettle last week, I did not proclaim

“Merry Christmas” to every passerby. That greeting may not be welcomed by a person of a different religious faith, or of no religious faith, who does not celebrate Christmas.

Perhaps you have assumed, as I did, that the Church has always celebrated Christ’s birth. How could it not have?

But there are no references to a celebration of the birth of Christ in the New Testament Epistles. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Church was not celebrating Christmas and was still debating the date of Christ’s birth. The historical record is devoid of any Church celebration of Christ’ birth until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Three hundred years without Christmas!

In fact, the Romans, who had always celebrated the winter equinox on December 25 of the Roman calendar, in the late third century made December 25 into a major festival. Some historians believe the Church began celebrating Christ’s birth on December 25 in order to undercut the December 25<sup>th</sup> Roman mid-winter celebration.

So, who stole the December 25 Christmas? Hint: it wasn’t the Grinch. The Church, or at least part of it, seems to have appropriated it. I say part of it, because the Church has never been in full agreement on December 25 as the date of Christ’s birth. When we were in Bethlehem in January, a few years ago, we saw a city covered with Christmas decorations. But what I first thought were left over Christmas decorations, were rather part of the 10 day mid-January celebration of Christmas in the various Orthodox churches, which predominate in Bethlehem.

The great festival of the church has always been the day of Christ’s resurrection, which we celebrate every Sunday as well during the Season of Easter.

Christmas Day (inclusive of its vigil, Christmas Eve), is a bit of a Johnny-Come-Lately on the church calendar. For the churches of the Anglican Communion, such as the Episcopal Church, the season of Christmas lasts 12 days and is a Principal Feast. Christmas is, a Festival in the Lutheran Churches and a holy day of obligation in the Roman Catholic Church.

Whether we think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a virgin or the young woman of Judah, or what date we think is the proper date of Christmas, does not get to the message at the heart of Christmas and our Faith. Rather, the message of Christmas is that a young, unmarried woman, through an act of God, had a child and named him Emmanuel: God is with us. And with the birth of Jesus, God became a human being and lived among us, inspiring the rise of the Church, God’s community of faithful people, and offering hope to all the world, a hope in which we will not be disappointed.

Sure, our hopes for Christmas celebrations outrun reality. This Christmas celebration, also, will not meet all of our expectations. But don’t let this get us down.

Christmas will meet our most profound hope, our most abiding hope, that God is, and always will be, Emmanuel, God with us.

May the light of Christmas shine for each of you this Christmas Season.  
Amen.

Dale Ramerman, Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes, December 22, 20