

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Isaiah 7:10-16  
Matthew 1:18-25

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Northfield, Minnesota  
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## Immanuel

Last Sunday a member told me she had a concern about where I stood while leading worship. I was taken aback as this is a concern with multiple symbolic implications. Standing on pew level, I symbolically identify with the congregation, with the “priesthood of all believers” and the horizontal dimension of ministry. Standing at the pulpit, I evoke an entirely different set of symbols: authority, the vertical dimension of ministry, but also my willingness to bear what Jung called the archetype of the priest, the symbolic weight of the Holy One.

As I searched for the right words to explicate these weighty matters, she went on, “You see, last week you stood so close to that table with the candle on it, that if you had leaned back, you would have caught yourself on fire. I worried about you the whole service.”

Never mind. I love telling this story. It captures a moment I need to remember. All clergy, maybe even normal people – excuse me, other people - need such moments: when humanity trumps pretension, and you are able to laugh kindly at yourself. For me such moments help to banish my own oppressive perfectionism. They remind me that it really is OK - that like so many other things - where I stand doesn't really matter. It's no big deal. I can stand wherever I want to, on my head if I so please, just as long as I don't catch myself on fire.

Ultimately, I believe this laughter is about accepting one's humanity, including abilities and talents to be sure, but also one's limits. We are human, from the humus, the soil, people of the earth; and we do well to humor ourselves. Appropriate humility rests on accepting from whence we came.

We are of the earth. Yet out of that same earth, according to the Genesis story, God formed Adam, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, the Holy Spirit. In today's gospel, God again breathes the breath of life into a creature of the earth. In a dream, Joseph learns that the child his fiancée Mary is going to bear has been conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit. Because of this conception, Joseph is to name the child Immanuel, “God with us”.

Progressive Christians, like many in the UCC, back off from this story about Joseph's dream. After all and by another name, it is the story of the virgin birth, one of the fundamentals of fundamentalism. Many of us simply can't accept the virgin birth as biological fact, so we really don't pay much attention to this story.

I invite us this morning not to back off from the story, but to accept it in its fullest implications. This doesn't mean accepting it as a biological fact, but as metaphor. Joseph's dream isn't about biology. It's about the relationship between God and human flesh manifested in Jesus, a baby born in a manger at Bethlehem, during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Yet this very real baby, Joseph is told, is also Immanuel, "God with us".

Every Advent we sing the 12<sup>th</sup> century hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". This year we sang it twice. I'm sure there are deep theological implications about this, as there are about where one stands in leading worship, but I chose it twice because it's one of Theo's favorites, and I've learned after thirty-five years in the ordained ministry that one does well to choose hymns the organist likes. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel", "God with us", the essence of today's gospel, indeed the essence of Christianity itself. Not the virgin birth, but Immanuel. This is what we celebrate at Christmas: Jesus is Immanuel.

Immanuel means that human flesh is God-capable. John says the same thing at the beginning of his gospel using a different metaphor. For John Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. This Word, the same as the one spoken by God in Genesis to create the heavens and the earth, is incarnate as the baby Jesus. It's as if the star that shines over the stable was once created by the child lying in a manger inside of it.

At Bethlehem the fullness of "God with us" is revealed. And in part it is our story: the flesh we bear is also capable of bearing God. Immanuel says something essential about us, as well as something essential about the baby Jesus.

One of my favorite authors Reynolds Price says in the character Roxanna Slade that there are six or eight lessons we urgently need to learn during our lifetimes. I believe that one of these is that we are God-capable. The flesh and blood that you and I share is also shared by God.

For Christians Jesus is a unique event in human history. Fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, Jesus is Immanuel. Grappling with what this means, the early church taught that Jesus is perfectly God and perfectly human. In contrast, none of us are perfect in either of these directions. But all of us, some more, some less, but all of us are capable of something of God. Not the perfection of God like Jesus, but we all can bear something of God.

The twelfth century mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that every person was a word of God in a book about God. Not the Word of God, only Jesus was the Word, but each of us is a word. The person sitting next to you is a word of God, one to be respected and revered as such. Likewise, our own flesh is also a word of God, and we are to respect ourselves as such.

We are not the perfect Word. For our own sakes, we must accept our limits as imperfect humans. Yet we are also God-capable and have something unique to say about God.

Immanuel tells us something about ourselves that we urgently need to learn. Likewise Immanuel tells us an essential lesson about God - who is not God aloof, or God impassive, or God indifferent, but “God with us”. I want this to mean exactly what it means. God is with us. In our times of greatest pain, shattering loss, and deepest despair, where is God? God is with us, giving us the courage and strength to go on, empowering us to respond with compassion and forgiveness. And in the best of times, moments of indescribable joy, where is God? God is with us, sharing our laughter.

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

