

## Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

A Lakota Chief was standing night watch with the young men of the tribe. They asked him how they would know when the night was over and the dawn had broken fully.

“Can we be sure the night is over, when we can tell the difference between a cow and a sheep on a distant hill?”

“No.” He answered them.

They asked again, “Will we know that the night is over when we can see the color of a bird on the branch of a tall tree?”

He answered no again.

“Well then”, they asked one more time, a bit exasperated, “how can we know?”

He answered them, “You will know that this night is over when you look into the face of the woman or man next to you, and see your sister or brother.”

Christmas Day is almost here. We are on the verge of celebrating the long night being over. The darkness being overcome by the light- entering into the

world through Jesus to show humanity who love is, and what love looks like. Humanity itself has waited for the fulfillment of God's promise from the prophets. This fulfillment did not of course come in an expected way. Joseph, it seems, had a long night, or maybe a few, in his perspective we heard today. Mary had some long nights too we can imagine.

Now, we typically hear on this last Sunday in Advent Mary's response to the good news growing within her. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she sings. But not in Matthew's Gospel. In his sharing, we hear Joseph's response. And even though he doesn't speak, we can imagine some of what he might be thinking. A righteous man, we're told, he was betrothed to Mary and found out she was with child. Surprise. Betrayal. Anger. Shame. Fear. We don't know for sure, but we do know that before he went to sleep that one long night, he had resolved to separate from her amicably, we might say today. God had other plans, and spoke to Joseph through an angel in a dream, filled him in on some of what was happening, and Joseph's heart was unhardened.

What we miss hearing is what happens right before this in Matthew's Gospel. A genealogy about the genesis of Jesus, a word that invites us to look to the beginning of creation, and the way our faithful God continues to reach out to us without fail to fulfill it. The genesis of Jesus comes through generation upon generation of unexpected people. Historian James Boyce says that early Christians even looked at the birth of Christ as the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Creation- the event

that sustains creation itself. God comes through men and women. Through long nights and very short days of opposing hate. Through the newness of God breaking in with new life and in new ways.

Sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes we don't know until many years later and only with hindsight. God with us, Immanuel, often comes at what feels like an interruption. We think we might be chugging along just fine- plans set in place- acting how we see fit or even how we hear God calling to us. And then, God comes to us in a different way. But as Matthew reminds us, at the beginning and at the end, through the name Immanuel, and through Jesus' last words as he tells his disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Because on this final Sunday in Advent, we recognize that the long night isn't over. That we wait and long for God to interrupt finally, cease the division in our world, and reunite us to one another as it was in the beginning in creation. Just like Joseph, now is the time for dreaming, for dreaming for hope for our world, for dreaming for open eyes and open hearts, for dreaming that all may know they are loved, valued. And then, just like Joseph, now is the time to wake from sleep, and acknowledge that God with us means that God is working through us and with us to make those dreams become a reality.

Dark nights happen individually and communally. Disillusionment and dread can become the main motivations in our lives instead of hope, joy, peace,

and love. Despite that, we know God is faithful because of working through people like Joseph and Mary. And that while this story is about miraculous birth, it's truly about the continuity of God's action in the world, and that action revolves around Grace. It's all about God. And as Reinhold Niebuhr would say, "It is more likely that we come to understand God to be at work in the ambiguities, the twists, and the ironies of human history than through other means."

Holy interruptions- to the lives of Joseph and Mary, to our lives- a necessity of a new way of being and doing everything. There are consequences to this newness, to these interruptions. We are awakened to new possibilities. It can be exciting, thrilling. We can often face our darkest emotions. Our deepest doubts and wonderings. It requires us to embrace the holy with trust and faith. It breaks us open just so God can break in. Are there ways this year that God surprised you by being with you, by breaking into your life? Or on the flip side, are there ways where you thought God's presence was lacking in your life or in the world?

The long wait is almost over. Transformation is underway. There is still much peace to be found for many of our brothers and sisters. The yearning for hope continues to beat steadily like a heart beat in our communal life. But God is faithful. God fulfills God's covenant with us even when we're not faithful or loving or motivated by the right thing. The dark night is almost over. Jesus' coming is a

culmination of hopes from the past- no greater sign that God is among us. What will be a sign to you the night has ended, and dawn has broken?