

Sermon 22.12.19

Advent 4 (Year A)

By Joy Dipple

Readings: Isaiah 7: 10-16

Matthew 1: 18-25

Immanuel – God is with us: a phrase of course that literally describes the presence of God in Christ, as we celebrate the birth of Jesus in a few days' time. But throughout the history of this world God has frequently communicated with his people and made his presence known to them.

The Old Testament is full of stories of those who responded, or chose not to respond, to God's call on their lives. Then following the time of Jesus literally being present in this world, the apostles continued their communication with God through the Holy Spirit, and so it continues with all of us here today. God is with us so closely that for Christians God dwells within our very being. It is up to us to pay attention and listen.

Matthew often delved back into the Old Testament scriptures that revealed prophecies that could refer to Jesus. Prophets such as Isaiah were very sensitive to the world around them and how God spoke into their present situations, but so often the Old Testament stories reached forward as well with a message into the future.

Ahaz, in today's first reading, was King of Judah, and Isaiah was encouraging him to stand firm in the face of attack from the northern kingdom of Israel and Syria. The sign of God being with him would be through the birth of Isaiah's own son through his new wife, a child who would not be fully grown before God would rescue Ahaz from his two enemies. The land of the two kings Ahaz had dreaded would be laid waste, even if he would later be overrun by Assyria.

Matthew looks back to this prophecy and sees in Christ the fulfilment of the promise of God being with his people.

God speaks and people listen, and as Mary is given the role of becoming the mother of Jesus, we see the spiritual realm putting everything into place to protect the child. Joseph would be a guardian of his young wife and the Christ child.

On hearing that Mary was with child prior to their full marriage, Joseph was understandably perturbed. He was thinking of divorcing her quietly by signing the necessary legal papers but not exposing her to be judged publicly and stoned as a result. Now in a dream he is told not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Later, Joseph would receive another warning in a dream, to take Mary and the child into Egypt, to escape Herod's clutches. As a God fearing man Joseph listened when these divine encounters occurred, and responded obediently.

God made his presence known to Old Testament prophets; he made himself known to those who would protect the Christ child, and in Christ God made himself physically known to his followers. Then by his Spirit he made himself known to the apostles and others.

Today the presence of Christ is still revealed to us, as 21st century disciples of Jesus. How it happens is usually through scripture, through prayer, communion, contact with other Christians, praise, and sometimes through dreams and other God incidents. It has been said that the more we pray the more frequently we notice divine coincidences.

Remarkably there are numerous accounts of God revealing his presence to people in quite a personal way, especially in countries where Christians are persecuted or Bibles aren't allowed.

I would like to read to you now one such story, which was in a booklet called 'Speak Life'.

A middle eastern missionary called Yazim told the testimony of a man who lived outside a city known for vast opium use. The man said this: "A man wearing all white knocked at my door every night and I couldn't look at him because his face was so shiny and bright. He asked me to write down what he said. The next night he would come again." This continued for a month. When Yazim the missionary asked to see the notebook, he read: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made.' Yazim revealed that the man had the whole of John verbatim in his notebook. The man asked Yazim who it was that had visited him, and Yazim was able to explain.

There are many such stories where God is present and revealing his word, especially in countries starved of scripture.

God does reveal his presence, and though we may not often hear of such dramatic encounters in this country, nevertheless God will put into our direction those who need a Christian presence in their lives.

We experience God with us – Immanuel, and, perhaps particularly at this Christmas time, we can show others that he is indeed present with them too.