Sermon on Advent 4 Year A 2019

Ahaz (Isaiah 7:10-16) and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

Traditionally the theme of Advent 4 is love; the two texts that I will concentrate on in this homily provide an interesting way into our theme.

Traditionally Advent 4 focuses on this theme by way of Mary’s famous *fiat mihi* in English “let it be to me according to your word;” the most frequently painted scene in the history of the West, the Annunciation.

But not in Year A. In year A, the year we focus on Matthew, we get the famous contrast and comparison between Ahaz and Joseph, their “annunciation scenes” if you will.

Their reactions to God’s word helping us to wrestle with the different ways God’s love is seeking to save us and empower us in the midst of our struggles and challenges.

Here we have the stories of two confused men (the working title of my sermon! He says knowingly; you may know one or two yourself, no elbowing in church ☺)

In truth, two men in danger; one in power but who sees quite clearly that within a short time he may be a slave of a far greater power; the other in danger with hardly any power but in danger of losing the dearest person in his life;

One, using his best thinking has come to the end of his rope, in fact the rope has entangled him in an unbreakable knot and now he feels frozen in indecision, so much so that he feels he can’t respond to God in prayer.

The other has also used his best thinking but finds himself caught in an intractable dilemma but he, at least, has come to a decision; a decision that is the wrong one, though at the time he doesn’t know it!

Both are doing the best they can! One is commanded by a prophet to ask for a sign but refuses (Ahaz knows you’re not supposed to test God!); the other doesn’t ask for a sign but is given one!

The story of Isaiah and Ahaz is famous because it’s the text that supplies the verse about a young woman (Hebrew), or in the Greek translation, a virgin, bearing a child; a sign that Matthew, familiar with the Greek version, picks up and applies to Mary.

But in its original context, it’s not Mary, but Ahaz King of Judah who is in danger. Just to remind: Israel has split into two parts, like the two St. Matthews! There’s Israel, often known as Ephraim to the north and Judah, where Jerusalem sits, to the south.

Syria and Ephraim are in an alliance against the superpower Assyria; but they’re not strong enough to resist invasion, they want the southern Kingdom of Judah to join them.

But Ahaz doesn’t see how this could be in his interest at all! It’s as if there’s a two gangs of ruffians facing off in the school playground and you’re minding your own business walking home from school when all of a sudden both parties start calling out to you asking you to join their side

and when you just keep walking because you don’t want to get involved they both start threatening that they’re going to gang up on you; out of nowhere you’ve become a scapegoat!

Ah yes, when I remember stuff like that I don’t miss my school days.

Ahaz is out checking his water supplies, preparing himself for a siege, not from Assyria but from his northern compatriots! when along comes Isaiah the prophet who tries to get Ahaz to take up his theological as well as his political responsibilities.

Ahaz isn’t just any king, he’s part of the Davidic seed of promise. But Ahaz is so worried, so tied up in confusion about what to do politically that he’s forgotten that there’s a God who wants to help him.

Sometimes we try our best and there’s no right answer and so we go through our routines, endlessly checking details as if staring at your checkbook is all of a sudden going to reveal that we’re in the black when every other time we’ve looked at it we see our deficit.

I don’t know how you feel when you’re in the middle of crisis and someone tries to give you spiritual advice, often it’s not that helpful; so Ahaz can barely countenance Isaiah’s presence but Isaiah’s presence is meant to signal to Ahaz God’s presence.

Though Ahaz is completely befuddled, God isn’t giving up on him and even though Ahaz can’t pray because he’s so tied up in anxiety, God grants him a sign, not a sign really, but a promise.

Isaiah isn’t predicting a miracle, just that Judah, that society will continue; what better way to say that than a young woman will give birth?

She will name her child Emmanuel, God-with-us. The sign that God is with Judah is that life could be “normal!”

Isaiah is saying that salvation need not be dramatic, it can be as hum-drum as doing your very best and thinking “I’m overreaching if I do and a coward if I don’t” and then, unexpectedly a door opens, a crack of light comes in and things work out! God-with-us; God sustaining us even when we don’t know or can’t see or can’t pray!

When I see a child who struggled at birth but is now doing fine, and we have examples in this parish, I think “Salvation as life-is-normal” is salvation indeed!

Joseph too is a man in danger, a man who, it would appear is damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. First of all, like Ahaz, he’s in distress and anxiety; he’s also heartbroken.

“Why?” must ring through him like a never-ending gong! Mary’s story must at some level make it worse, why can’t she at least tell the truth!?

But unlike Ahaz who can’t seem to think at all in the middle of his emotional turmoil; Joseph thinks, the Greek text says “seriously thinks.”

If he divorces Mary on grounds of adultery—something that a law-abiding Jew would be expected to do by the way—he’s lost the love of his life even before their life together begins *and* he’s imperiled the lives of both Mary and the child.

To say that there were no social supports for poor unmarried young mothers in that culture and time would be a gross understatement; especially among the poor; often prostitution was their only hope to avoid starvation.

But to go ahead with the marriage and raise their child as his own would be to break the law; it would be to collude in breaking one of the 10 commandments, one of the laws that held that society together; this would imperil his economic and spiritual future.

Joseph is a righteous man, by that the text doesn’t mean a goodie-two-shoes, but a man who’s trying to do right by God, by others and by himself.

His best thinking, his best serious, non-reactive thinking, has led him to trust the law (that the law is good and perfect was mother’s milk to an Israelite!); somehow if he obeys “quietly” it won’t be too bad for Mary or himself or the baby, he hopes; and if it is, well that’s on God!

It’s the wrong decision but he can’t know that! Like Ahaz he’s doing the best he can!

Denise, my better half, besides being a priest, is a registered Spiritual Director, one of the areas she’s studied is the role of dreams in our spiritual lives; she tells me that when we’ve done our best thinking and find that we are still in confusion, often a dream will help sort things out; we might not even remember the dream but an interesting solution will come to us.

In Joseph’s case, his dream, what a dream analyst would call his Jungian Archetype, an angel of the Lord, tells him to break the law in order to keep its deeper truer meaning; to take Mary’s shame on himself in order that in a fresh and personal way God can show him, indeed the world what salvation means.

And Joseph acting in response to this message, does break the law, he keeps faith with Mary, with his deep intuition and love, probably to his great loss; maybe he was barred from his synagogue; probably he became one of those carpenters of the odd job, we don’t know.

I tell these men’s stories from this particular perspective this morning to help us see that the names: Jesus, God-saves and Emmanuel, God-with-us are not just names but a promise to our particular conundrums, our own confusions

The sin that Jesus comes to save us from refers not just to things we deliberately do wrong but the ways we fall short in our finite condition; the ways we think rules or the law will save us, and the sheer “do-nothing, hear-nothing” cowardice that freezes us in indecision when we feel threatened.

The Love we celebrate today on the fourth Sunday of Advent is the love that meets us in our indecision, our bad decisions and says, I’m here to help; I’m jumping into this mess with you; I’m taking your shame so let’s get started! Amen.