

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

During these four weeks of the Advent season, we have been waiting, expectantly, longingly, lovingly, for the birth of Jesus, for that remarkable event when God comes to earth and lives among us. And today in our Gospel reading, we jump ahead a few days and hear Matthew's version of that event. Now, you know, I expect, that there are two versions of the birth of Jesus in the Bible, one from Luke and one from Matthew. Those, by the way, are the only two stories scripture tells of that event. The Luke version, which we always read on Christmas Eve, is the famous one, with the trek to Bethlehem, the over-occupied village inn, the hay and the manger and the angels and the shepherds, and so on. That's from Luke, and that is, in fact, the way we'll tell the story on Saturday at 7. But Matthew's version is quite different. For one thing, Matthew tells about the Magi, the three kings, who come to find the Christchild, not in a barn, by the way, but in a house. And while Luke spends a lot of ink telling about Mary and her relatives, Matthew concentrates on Joseph.

As the time for the child's birth grew near, Matthew tells us that an angel of the Lord came to Joseph and shared some important information with him, namely just who the child was to become. According to Matthew, the angel says: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." And then Matthew adds this historical note: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, "which means, "God is with us." In these few angelic remarks, Matthew has told Joseph, and us, everything he thinks we need to know about Jesus and why it would be important for him to be born. Forget all your reservations, Joseph, for this child is just what the world has been waiting for, just what the world needs now.

First, and foremost I guess, is that the child is of divine origin; he was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. That certainly is one strong and unique characteristic, but the child is also to be from the house of David the great historical king, since Joseph will also call him his son. The messiah, according to Jewish tradition, will be a descendant of the legendary David, so the child will satisfy that requirement as well. Then there is this name which Joseph is told to give to his newborn son, the name Jesus. That, BTW is the Greek form of the very common Hebrew name "Joshua", which comes from the verb meaning "to save". So God's angel wants Joseph, whose responsibility it apparently is, to give the boy a name which is symbolic for his mission, to save the world from sin. And then Matthew goes on to explain to his readers that the child Jesus is an answer to the ancient prophecies, that the prophets promised that God would send a Messiah, a savior, and this child is it. Finally, Matthew tells us that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. At the very end of the Gospel he wrote, in the very last sentence, Matthew has Jesus say to his disciples, "And I will be with you to the end of the age." Emmanuel, God with us.

So Matthew, when we read his account of the Christmas event, reminds us that this child who is being born is: Godly, kingly, salvic, historically valid, and humankind's constant and reliable companion. Matthew tells us all those things in these couple of sentences. And we thank him for that! But why, do you suppose, did both Matthew and Luke want especially to tell this part of the Jesus story, and why did they tell it differently? The people they expected to read these stories, those early Christian churchgoers, had a bit of a dilemma: For some fifty years the famous apostles, the Christian leaders, and even Paul himself, had been telling them that Jesus was coming again. Soon. Within just one generation or so. But all that time had passed, and no Jesus. Well, no Jesus in the flesh, anyway. Both Matthew and Luke felt it was important, even crucial, that these Christians not lose heart, for they were being persecuted, in some cases even tortured and executed, while they were waiting. Waiting expectantly, longingly, lovingly.

Sure, they all knew some of Jesus' famous sayings. Sure, they had all been told about Jesus' great sacrifice on the cross and about his glorious resurrection, and about how, after that, he had somehow spent a month or so among his followers teaching them about new life and the mission he wanted them to do. But they were also told that he would come back as king and savior and that they would all then get their just reward...but it hadn't happened exactly. Here they were, just like their ancestors, waiting on the messiah, and being told that they just needed to be patient. They were to use the waiting time wisely, just like the prophets had told their forefathers and mothers, by preparing themselves, by living wholesome lives and setting the bar as high as God would like. Meanwhile, a good Christmas story wouldn't hurt, would it?! Especially if it reminded them just how important this Christmas child was (Godly, kingly, salvic, historic, and constant), and therefore just how important it was to endure the waiting for his return.

But, dear friends, we learn other things from reading these stories, too. And sometimes we have to read a bit between the lines. Sometimes we have to think and feel between the lines, too. And there, in the scriptures, a profound truth waits to be discovered each time they are read: Verily, truthfully, Jesus is God's grace, God's unconditional love, a love from which God never intends for us to be separated. All our waiting and preparing is no doubt faithful, maybe even obedient, maybe even necessary, but sitting back and twiddling our thumbs while waiting for a better day isn't very useful. Just biding our time, while we think we are waiting for God to do *something*, isn't very helpful. Just hanging out, waiting for Jesus to show up, isn't really very smart. We're going to miss something if that's all we can do. Yes, Jesus is always coming to us from the future, but perhaps we should be rushing out to meet him. Yes, God's loving intent is always being poured out for us, but perhaps it's best if we respond enthusiastically with our own loving intentions. God's blessings are continually showered on us, but we need to open our arms and our hearts to receive. Just like Joseph.

What Joseph is being given by the angel is an invitation. Does he receive it and act on it? Does he RSVP? Advent is an invitation. Among all the other things we can say about Advent, it is an invitation. An invitation to come to Jesus' birthday, an invitation to celebrate new life, an invitation to meet God face to face. When the eastern sky brightens each morning before sunrise, we are receiving an invitation, to be present for another new day. When we read the scriptures, especially the Gospel, we are being invited to celebrate our relationship with God. When we light the advent candles each of these weeks, it's an invitation to receive the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. When we "green-up" the church today, we will be inviting everyone to get in the spirit of Christmas. The Oneida Chorale concert at VVS, and the Master's Touch concert here have been invitations from the faithful and talented singers. And our sign out front displays an invitation to show up for the Christ masses on Saturday and Sunday later this week. Advent is the eternal invitation to the great feast which is always renewed in our hearts, thanks be to God's grace.

So, what do you do when you receive a welcome invitation? Well, you probably spend some time and effort preparing yourself. I, for one, make sure I get my laundry done. I clean myself up, too. I try to work out my schedule so I don't show up late. I try my best to put on my happy face. I might even be a wise man and bring a gift. And if it's an open invitation, like God's always is, I pass it on to everyone I meet. Advent is an invitation. Check your spiritual mailboxes so you can be sure to receive it. It's a "come-as-you-are" party, but spending a little preparatory time wouldn't hurt. But, please, don't forget about it, and please make sure you show up! Advent is the invitation to the eternal feast. Have you RSVPed? Have you responded? Amen.