

4th Sunday in Advent

Signs and Wonders

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In times of doubt and distress we can often ask God for a sign, a sign that we are going in the right direction, a sign that he cares how things turn out, a sign that he exists at all. Today in our first reading we see the opposite. Today it is God that wants to give a sign of his love and care. But the King, distraught and in danger of being conquered by his enemies, he resists God's request to ask him for a sign. God wants to give a sign of reassurance, but the king is too afraid to ask.

What is he afraid of? He says he does not want to put God to the test. But that only exasperates God. What is King Ahaz so afraid of then? I suspect it is in what would happen if God does not come through. Then he would be really lost, abandoned, without hope. Even though God is telling him that he will come through, Ahaz is worried that maybe he won't. So what is the King afraid of? He is afraid that his faith may be an illusion.

God decides to give him a sign anyway, without his having to ask for it. And the sign is?

"A virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And he shall be named Emmanuel--God is with us."

And God was with Ahaz. In the time it takes for a virgin to conceive and bear a son the enemies of Judah were defeated, not by Ahaz himself, but by the enemy of his enemies--the dreaded Assyrian juggernaut, the most powerful empire on Earth up to this time. What goes around comes around.

And around again. While the enemy of his enemies, the Assyrians did not prove to be Ahaz's friend either. After mopping up his enemies, the Assyrians, being in the neighborhood, turned to Ahaz and laid siege to Jerusalem. From the frying pan into the fire, one might say. But then again, in the time it takes for a virgin to conceive and bear a son, the enemy of his enemies, now turned his own enemy was struck by a plague that so decimated the Assyrian army that the King of Assyria was forced to call off his attack and return back to Ninevah, triumphantly claiming victory over Ahaz' enemies. Thus were Jerusalem and Ahaz spared again. The existential horror was finally over. Not thanks to themselves, but thanks to God. Appearances to the contrary, God had indeed been with them throughout.

In the Gospel we find another disaster in the offing. Joseph discovers that his fiancé is pregnant, and the kid is not his. Now that is another kind of a sign, and not a good one. He decides to break off the engagement quietly so as not to put Mary through public shaming, if not stoning. But he is also doing it to avoid his own humiliation. Mary has been unfaithful to him, and they are not even married yet. What kind of a woman is she. What kind of a man is he? In the strongly patriarchal society of ancient Israel, his honor has been destroyed, his life is over.

But then he receives a sign, in the form of an angel appearing in a dream. Now I have to think that this dream was more a nightmare. Overwhelmed by the news, his mind racing seeking for an answer, I imagine him tossing and turning, sleeping in snatches. And what does the angel say to him? "Marry Mary, take your beloved as your wife, take her child as your son. You have not been cursed but blessed. For this child is God's child. God is calling you to raise his child. For he literally is Emmanuel-- God with us."

Mary is the paradigm of Christian faith. She said yes to what God called her to do. Joseph is no less a father of our faith. He too said "Yes, be it done unto me according to your will." And he will do a good job raising this child. So good, that the best, most natural way his son will have for referring to God, is to call him "Father."

This advent we await the birth of this same son again in our hearts, in our homes, in our community, in our country, in our world.. May we be alert to the signs of his coming. May we have faith that God will come once more and be with us in good times and in bad, in our joys and in our need.

May we too cry out Emmanuel, God is with his people.