

Church of the Crossroads
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2007
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“IN THE MIDST OF OUR MESS”

Isaiah 7:10–17
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Matthew 1:18-25

I begin with a story I have told before. It’s the one about the two elderly sisters who lived by themselves in a farmhouse. It was one of those old fashioned farmhouses with a shed at the back of it for the animals. Well, as the years went by, so did the eyesight and the energy, and gradually the dirt and the dust began to pile up. The two sisters simply couldn’t keep up. Dishes were left sometimes for days in the sink; papers were strewn about; bills were not paid; things were not put back in their proper place. Then, the animals housed in the shed at the back of the house, seeking attention, began to wander into the house itself. An unmistakable barnyard smell began to creep throughout each and every room.

Christmas was approaching, and the two elderly sisters thought it would be good to send out a Christmas card to their friends and neighbors. They had extended discussions as to what kind of message they should write in the card. There were several possibilities: “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year” was one; others were conventional variations on the theme. Yet, these did not satisfy the need of the sisters to say something that would capture the meaning of the season *for them*. In the meanwhile, the dirt and the dust continued to pile up. Finally, one of the sisters, taking a good look around her, came up with the wording for their greeting, and the other agreed. This is what they wrote: “Thank God, our Lord comes to us in the midst of our mess.”

Thank God, our Lord comes to us in the midst of our mess. In the book of Isaiah, we find another person who found himself in quite a mess. His name was Ahaz, and for sixteen years in the latter part of the 7th century BCE he ruled he rule as the King of Judah and Jerusalem. During the course of his reign, the land of Judah was threatened by Syria and Israel, and it was said that “the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” Uppermost in his mind was the question as to how to get himself out of his mess. He decided to align himself with

Tiglath-pilezer, the King of Assyria, asking him and his army to come and overrun Syria and Israel. In order to cater to Tiglath-pilezer, King Ahaz abandoned God and began to promote the worship of the gods of Assyria.

It is at this point that Isaiah the prophet speaks to Ahaz, first telling him, “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint” because of Syria and Israel. Ahaz does not listen, and proceeds with the plan of his own choosing. Then Isaiah comes again to Ahaz, suggesting that he ask God for a sign. Ahaz, pretending to be religious, says that he, for one, could not possibly put God to the test by asking for a sign. Isaiah, accusing Ahaz of wearying God, says that God will give a sign, anyway.

Look, the young woman is with child and shall
bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

—Isa 7:14

Then Isaiah says that before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good (in other words, in a very short time) the land of Syria and Israel will be deserted, and Jerusalem will be spared, and so it came to pass, at least until the time of the Babylonian takeover, fifty years later.

Isaiah’s prophecy of the young woman bearing a child called Immanuel later fed into the rising messianic expectations of the Jewish people, and when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into the Greek language in the version known as the Septuagint, the “young woman” of the Hebrew became a “virgin” in the Greek. This perhaps was done in order to give more miraculous power and mystery to the prophecy.

Anyway, when Luke and Matthew wrote their stories of the birth of Jesus, they went back to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and referred to Mary not as a young woman, but as a virgin. Matthew also speaks of the Child Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us.

I would suggest that Matthew utilized the Isaiah prophecy as it was translated into the Greek in order to make sense of a different kind of *mess*. (Ah—there we have our mess, again) After all, it was a messy scene. To put it simply, Mary, who was presumed to be a virgin when she was engaged to Joseph—they were not yet married—is discovered to be pregnant. How she got to be pregnant is a mystery, but there is a hidden tradition that she had become so not by Joseph, but by another man. For this reason, Mary has

always held special significance for women, in many varying circumstances, who have borne children out of wedlock.

It was a messy situation for Mary and Joseph, to say the least. Joseph wants to dismiss Mary quietly from the marriage contract, which may seem cruel, but given the religious sanctions against a woman caught in adultery, which included stoning, he may not have been all that callous. Anyway, Matthew uses the Isaiah prophecy to save Mary and Joseph from their disgrace. The child born to Mary will be none other than Emmanuel, God-with-us. Joseph, by the instruction of the angel sent by God, gives the child the name Jesus, which means “to save.”

It is a messy story, and the messiness does not stop there. In Luke’s story, when Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, they cannot find any room in the inn, and the child is born in an animal shed and laid in a feeding trough. Shepherds, known for their rough, callous behavior, are the ones who receive the message of the angels. And Herod tries to kill the child, as the story goes.

I think it is amazing and significant and compelling—not factually, but in a way that counts—that God chose to enter into the world in such a messy way, and that in truth God still chooses to come to the world, to us, in the midst of our mess.

For life is indeed messy, when you get right down to it, and our world surely finds itself in the midst of a mess, with all the warfare and violence and injustice. We would be remiss if we did not add the overwhelming problem of global warming. And in the midst of our mess, we are like King Ahaz, who tried to escape into his own virtual reality—his silly attempt to save the day by aligning himself with the King of Assyria, who had decided to overrun everything in sight anyway. We too try to escape into our virtual realities. We have a desire to control the situation, as messy as it is, to make everything neat and orderly by finding the right answer, the perfect solution. Or, we just give up on all the difficult task of facing the mess we’re in and attempt instead to escape the mess by retreating to a computerized world—talk about a virtual reality—with I-pods stuck in our ears solving the world’s problems by responding to each other’s blogs—surely, a new form of armchair liberalism—but our attempts to escape from our messiness and secure ourselves and our world are fruitless, simply because we human beings have not yet given ourselves over to a different way of living, a way of living that God embraces in the birth of the Christ Child—the way of

vulnerability and compassion, and a commitment to the things of the earth and the relationships that we are given to nurture and cherish.

If the story of Christmas does anything, it surely calls us back, back to our messiness, back to our need to meet others not in cyberspace but face to face, back to our need to make ourselves vulnerable as did Mary and Joseph, back to our need to care for the earth, back to our need to be makers of peace and doers of justice, back to our need to cherish and love those whom God gives us, surely our husbands and wives and partners and children and mothers and fathers and friends, but also God's other children, the homeless and the hungry and the victims of war and hatred.

The story of the birth of the Christ Child, in other words, brings us back to earth, to life with all of its messiness, for the earth is where we belong, and life with all of its relationships and challenges, and life—as messy as it sometimes can be—is the one thing that has been entrusted by God to our care.

And the Good News is this, that the birth of the child is truly a sign—as it was for Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and has been for countless generations of the faithful—that God comes to us in the midst of our mess, that God is for us and with us and within us, that God is for the world and with the world, and within all things, and what I want to say this morning is that this Good News makes all the difference, for it means that we can live our lives hopefully, courageously, faithfully. God chooses to come to us in the midst of our mess, and so it is in the midst of our mess that we are invited to give ourselves over to the new life that God gives in Jesus, the child of Mary and Joseph, born in an animal shed and laid in a feeding trough.

Yes, this day, the Christmas message of those two elderly sisters can be ours also: “Thank God, our Lord comes to us in the midst of our mess.” And so, in the words of our prayer of confession this morning:

Our souls take their rest, O God, in the joy of what you are.
Let it be enough that you are for us, with us, and within us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

¹ from *Prayers from Riverside*, ed. Leo S. Thorne (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983)