

4th Sunday of Advent – 18 December, 2016
Sermon preached by the Rev. Deacon Holly Hanback
Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

Christ be in the words I speak and Christ be in the ears that hear me. In the name of One God; Creator, Redeemer, Life Giver. Amen.

Jesus. The name that means “to save”, “to deliver”. Also known as Emmanuel. The name that means “God is with us”. This morning let’s take a closer look at the Birth of Jesus the Messiah through the lens of Joseph’s experience. Mary and Joseph were “engaged” to be married. The Angel Gabriel had come to Mary and told her that she was going to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Messiah. But Joseph was not there for that conversation. He didn’t have the holy experience of the Angel’s proclamation. Mary, a young teenage girl, had to go by herself to tell Joseph, her soon to be husband that she was pregnant. And in fact, pregnant by God.

Imagine for a moment being Joseph. His young soon to be wife has just come to him and told him she was pregnant and he knows, *he knows* for certain he is not the father of the baby. The only reality he could possibly believe is that she has betrayed him and been unfaithful. He must have felt anger and shame, sadness and heartbreak. What was he going to do? In his custom, he had two choices: break the marriage contract by publicly calling out Mary’s betrayal or quietly divorce her. In the first scenario – breaking the marriage contract publicly – Mary would be executed; most likely stoned to death. Joseph made his choice to quietly divorce Mary and spare her, and her child’s life.

And then Joseph has a dream; a dream in which an Angel of God appears. The Angel in Joseph’s dream has been sent to make Joseph aware that Mary’s pregnancy is actually and truly the work of the Holy Spirit. Angels are messengers of God that don’t just pop up at random times in random places in scripture. They usually come on the scene when people are living through hard times faced with painful choices and decisions. Joseph was a nice guy who was going to quietly divorce Mary, which was the kinder of the two choices. But once the Angel came to announce that God was with him and at work in the world Joseph understood that more was required of him. Joseph knew he was to act in loving service to Mary, taking her as his wife, bearing what would have been her shame upon himself and naming their child the name they were given by God. Angels come into our complicated messy lives as messengers sent to share with us God’s truth and God’s desires for us. Angels come to remind us of the Incarnation of God – not just at Christmas time but all year long. God is with us. Once we know this, once we understand that God is always with us, then we are expected to act, to move

forward in the direction God is calling us to love and serve others so that they too know that God is with them.

As a Parent Liaison with Loudoun County Public Schools it is my job to make sure that parents have all the resources they need to help their children succeed in school. I have the privilege of organizing a program at Christmas time for parents who can't afford to purchase gifts for their children. This past week I found myself working with a family that has experienced great tragedy and change in this past year. Due to their current circumstances, they can no longer afford to rent their house and be able to pay for gas, groceries and medicine. Each month after they pay their rent they have to pick out which bill they will pay and the other bills will have to wait. They could not afford to purchase gifts for their children this Christmas. I had great joy bringing bags of gifts to their home and seeing Mom and Dad's faces light up knowing they were going to be able to share in the joy of gift giving with their children. They said to me "You know people think because you have a house to live in that life is perfect. They don't know we can't afford our rent and we are getting more and more behind. They don't know we are struggling. You are an Angel to bring us these gifts. Surely God is with us! When we get back on our feet we are going to pay it forward, we are going to be an Angel for someone else."

The truth is I do understand. I do know how it is to live in a house and have everyone think your life is just perfect. I do know how it feels to struggle. Just a few years ago, I sat in my house, with my husband, and we had the hard conversation that we couldn't afford to pay our mortgage and get gifts for our children for Christmas. My husband had gone through a furlough that year and I was out of a job. Each month we were falling further behind. And then one day a letter arrived addressed to me with no return address. Inside were gift cards to stores with a note that said, "For you to purchase Christmas gifts for your children. God is always with us! Merry Christmas". My angel wanted to remain anonymous so I sent my Thank You's to God. And now each Christmas I go in search of parents who need the same hope that I received.

God came to be with Joseph and Mary just as they were; real people living in hard circumstances and making tough decisions. Mary said Yes to the angel Gabriel's message. Joseph said Yes to God's angel's message. Together they delivered Jesus into this world so that all people may know that God is with us. And now it is our turn to say yes and to deliver the message of angels and prophets. A message that our hurting world needs to hear now more than ever; God is with us.

God is with us. We do not have to fear. We do not have to despair. God is with us. This is our hope. This is our Joy. This is our peace. This is our faith. God so loved the world

that God came to be with us. God IS with us. Mary and Joseph hear this message from their angels and they act in faith by staying together and bringing God into this world for all of us. May we follow in their footsteps and proclaim the Good news that God is with us in word and deed. Amen.

Children's Sermon

Good Morning! My name is Deacon Holly. Deacon means I am a servant of God and Holly means I was named after a green, spiky bush with red berries. So, I guess I am a red, spiky servant of God. My husband and sons are here this morning and they can tell you I can be a bit prickly some days.

I looked up some other names such as Father Daniel: Father means he is a priest for God's people, caring for us and reminding us of God's love for us. And, Daniel means "God is my Judge".

We are St. Gabriel's church so I looked up Gabriel which means "God is my strength" and St. Gabriel was an archangel known for his strength – and did you know in the Old Testament Gabriel was the Angel who came to Daniel in his dreams and explained his visions? And in the New Testament he is the Angel who came to Mary and told her she would be the mother of Jesus.

Names are very important and have a lot of meaning. People spend a lot of time picking out names for their children. God is no different. God spent a lot of time figuring out what he would call his Son. And the angels told Mary and Joseph what name God picked out: Jesus. Did you know the name Jesus means "To Save" or "To Deliver"? This is why Jesus is also known as our Savior and our Redeemer. And in our Gospel today Jesus is also known as Emmanuel which means "God with us".

This is why Jesus name is so important to us. Every time we say the name of Jesus we are reminding ourselves and everyone who hears us that "God is with us". Amen.