

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish
Newark, DE
Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 18, 2016/Year A
Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God.
AMEN

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Sometimes things just don't seem to work out the way we expect. This might be a reasonable assessment of the feelings of some after this recent election cycle. We may think that this is the **ONLY** time in history something like this has happened, and we are the **ONLY** people that have ever had to deal with circumstances like these. It is probably not the first or the last time in our human history where events like this have happened. We are not that unique.

Over countless conversations held in prayerfulness with many these past six weeks, I have been asking the question that emerged out of my prayer early in this time of **kerfuffle** – “**So, what do you think God is up to in all this kerfuffle?**” I suspect this might have been the question of Joseph and Mary emerging from their enlightening encounters, just without so much of the **kerfuffle** feelings.

The Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent is always one of the “announcing” stories from Luke or Matthew. As we pause at this last way station of Advent and hear Matthew’s account of the encounter Joseph with the angelic messenger through his dreams. The Gospel can conjure up all those images of Christmas to come – the holy child Jesus in the manger, no crying he makes ... shepherds and their flock surrounding the manger, amazed at the sight ... Mary and Joseph, particularly beatific as they gaze on their son Jesus, the promised **Emmanuel, God with us.**

I am guessing that maybe this was not what the scene was really like, and the holy family of Jesus was not quite as holy as we make them out to be. Here we are again, pausing on the doorstep of Christmas, to embrace Joseph and Mary, angels and shepherds, cattle and sheep, and some wise ones from the East on the way to know their story is **OUR** story.

For it is truly **all in OUR family.**

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While the first three Sundays in Advent typically looks to the future coming of Christ, the Fourth Sunday of Advent always looks through the lens of **the promise fulfilled** in the birth of Jesus. While we have looked through the lens of Isaiah’s prophetic word and work, today we focus on how Matthew carries this vision of God’s Word now made flesh in this child Jesus.

The Gospel of Mathew is primarily concerned in establishing Jesus as *the Messiah* who fulfills scripture as prophesized over the centuries. Prior to the birth story we read this day, the first chapter of Matthew is dedicated to the **genealogy of Jesus** from Abraham to David, David to the Exile in Babylon, and to Joseph and Mary this day.

Joseph is described as “*a righteous man*” which means he was observant of the laws of God. These laws proscribed that any infringement of marital obligations during the engagement period, such as Mary’s condition, could be punished by divorce or even death by stoning. Joseph did not want this fate for Mary, and thus his plan to “*put her away quietly.*” Joseph is one who balanced his regard for the **law with compassion**, the very values of God’s kingdom to be lived and proclaimed by this child Jesus.

Before Joseph could act on this decision, an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream to provide the **God corrective** in the world scene to come. It is believed that dreams were a means of revelation by the Divine, and that every angel was not of the cute, cherubic visions we have created in art and song. Angels were **a terror** for any human to encounter, and if you do meet an angel in this life, it is good advice that you might **run very quickly**. Out of this dream, we again hear the prophet Isaiah’s words – “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*” This is the connecting thread that God of all creation now binds together the historic change promised in the lineage of David.

Joseph had a vision, but no explanation. Mary had her angelic enlightenment, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, but she did not have an instruction manual to explain what had happened then or what would happen next. What Joseph and Mary shared was **love of one another. They believed in God’s Purpose, God’s Picture, and God’s Plan through them.** No proof, no lawyers, no lifetime guarantee. **Just loving one another, and believing.**

Could this be enough for us today? Enough to calm our **kerfuffled** minds and hearts? Enough to believe, trust, and live into the question, “**So, what do you think God is up to in all this kerfuffle?**”

For it is truly **all in OUR family.**

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The late Jesuit scholar Raymond Brown argued that all churches should hear Matthews’s genealogy during Advent. He believed that these seventeen verses of tongue twisting names are the essence of the theology of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

While I hold this tradition in the spirit of Fr. Brown's passionate belief, I will not make you endure this genealogical "who's who" today. I do encourage you to read this family history of Jesus Christ from Matthew 1:1-17 before Christmas Day, because THIS family is OUR family.

What I have included are two renditions of the announcing moments to Mary and Joseph in our bulletin this day. The cover picture of **The Annunciation** hangs on the wall in my office as my companion throughout the year. It was painted by **Henry Ossawa Turner**, an African-American artist whose career began at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in Philadelphia. His talents were quickly recognized by the likes of Thomas Eakins and others, and his notoriety grew.

Although he gained confidence as an artist and began to sell his work, he had to deal with **racism** in Philadelphia. After the Civil War, many African Americans left the rural South and settled in Northern urban centers, at times coming into conflict with the increasing population of immigrants from Europe. Although painting became a therapeutic source of release for Tanner, the lack of acceptance in society was painful. In his autobiography *The Story of an Artist's Life*, Tanner describes the burden of racism:

“I was extremely timid and to be made to feel that I was not wanted, although in a place where I had every right to be, even months afterwards caused me sometimes weeks of pain. Every time any one of these disagreeable incidents came into my mind, my heart sank, and I was anew tortured by the thought of what I had endured, almost as much as the incident itself.”

In an attempt to gain artistic acceptance, Tanner left America for France in late 1891. Except for occasional brief returns home, he spent the rest of his life there.

The rendition of Joseph's Dream was created by **Rembrandt van Rijn**. Although more famous than Turner, his life was one of constant turmoil, personally and professionally. Most of his works were commissioned projects by the wealthy classes of Europe. Creations like **The Dream of Joseph, the Return of the Prodigal**, and other renditions of events from the Bible became therapeutic for his soul. Ultimately Rembrandt died in abject poverty and was buried in the pauper section of a Dutch Reformed cemetery in an unmarked grave. Yet this gift of his spirit continues to bless countless people to this day.

As we prepare for what the 21st century Christmas celebrations now bring, I invite you to make time this week to **prepare** which as you may recall is what Advent is all about, for LIVING the birth of Jesus in your life. Take the bulletin home and spend time in prayer with Mary and Joseph. Read Matthew 1:1-17, the genealogy of Jesus, the family of God's Love of which we are part.

“So, what do you think God is up to in YOU, right now?”

For it is truly **all in OUR family.**

AMEN