

Sermon
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18th, 2022

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Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

Readings: ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; ROMANS 1:1-7; MATTHEW 1:18-25

Saying yes to God. I often think about Mary's yes to God. Her yes to the Angel Gabriel – her "Let it be with me, according to your word" that made the Incarnation – God with us, in Jesus – possible. In other years, our lectionary brings us more of Mary on Sundays, but this year we have Joseph's "yes" to God...

Sam Wells says that "with" is the most important word in Scripture. He contrasts the words "with" and "for" pointing out that often "for" is easier than "with". Doing "for" someone keeps us at a "safe distance", whereas being with might ask more of us than we're comfortable giving. He points out that it would be easier if God came at Christmas to set the world right – to fix everything for us – to shower us with blessings, to make everything happy and surround us with good things.

"For" isn't the word God chose. God chose "with". With is about relationship, and connection. It's about partnership and participation, together.

Both Mary and Joseph said yes to "with".

In her "yes" to God, Mary chose relationship. She said "yes" to God *with* her. She said yes to bringing God into the world. She said yes to the "with" that is the relationship of mother and child.

Joseph also chose relationship – he chose "with" – in his "yes" to God. Stop for a moment and think about what happens to Joseph. This is a man who wakes up one day to find that his life is a mess. It's a mess he has absolutely nothing to do with, but he chooses to believe that God is present – that God is with him – in the mess. Joseph thinks that he has entered into a marriage contract with Mary, only to find out that she is pregnant, and not by him. The punishment for that if Joseph were to "expose her to public disgrace" was death by stoning. I love it that Joseph, even though he has been shaped by these rules – he is a 'righteous' man – is unwilling to condemn Mary to that and so plans to dismiss her quietly. I imagine that Joseph would have been upset, hurt by this news about Mary. I imagine that he would have been confused by his dream, by the angel's words. The judgement he would have experienced in standing by Mary would have been huge. But he did it. He did it, and that's the context for God's entry into this time and space. God came to be *with us* in a messy, uncomfortable way, and Joseph's "yes" is part of what made that possible. Joseph's yes made the space for the Messiah to be born.

God *is* with us. Not to solve all our problems, not to fix everything for us, but to be "with" us. To be with us in the joys of life – yes! – but also in all the messiness, the pain,

and the confusion. This morning's Gospel passage is a profound reminder of that. Joseph was presented with circumstances beyond his control, with a situation he would not have chosen for himself. How often do we find ourselves in situations we wouldn't choose? In circumstances beyond our control? We can say yes to God in these situations and circumstances just as Joseph did. It might not be what we'd planned, but God may be born here there and everywhere if we permit it. God is born when we say yes to God with us and to being with each other in all of life. This reminds me of Meister Eckhart's assertion that God is always needing to be born, that we are all meant to be mothers of God.

This morning we also heard the words of Isaiah: "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." (Isaiah 7:14) "Immanuel" – as we heard in our Gospel passage – means "God is with us". Isaiah prophesied that God would be with us.

Jesus is God with us, and he shows us how to be with God, with each other, with all of creation. There was, certainly, an element of "for" in Jesus: his healing, teaching, his death, resurrection, ascension – these were for us – but all of that "for" is firmly rooted in being "with" us, always and forever.

This is the lens we're invited to look through today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas Eve less than a week away. We're invited to see God's entry into this world – into this time and space – as a profound statement of being with us in the midst of turmoil, confusion, and messiness. We're invited to let that shape our relationships – with God, with each other. Joseph showed tremendous love and compassion in staying with Mary. He offers us a profound example of an openness and willingness to be with God, and to letting that shape his actions.

God's decision to be "with" us instead of "for" us at Christmas shapes who we are, as Christians. Christmas doesn't erase sorrow and grief and pain. It infuses those things with hope, and that hope lies in God having come to be with us, in Jesus. If we look to Jesus as a "problem solver" we will find ourselves wondering how so little has changed since that night 2000+ years ago.

God didn't come to us in Jesus to solve anything for us. He came to solve oppression, injustice, hatred, judgement, *with* us. God came to us in Jesus as love – endless, limitless love – embodied. To dwell among us to show us that it is possible to live with love, and compassion, and justice and peace.

In a few moments we'll share in our final WordCloud exercise. Our questions this week are "What love am I waiting for?" and "What signs of love do I see in the world?" We might hear alongside these questions "Where can I say yes to God?", and "Where do I see others saying yes to God with their lives?"

God didn't wait until we were ready, for the perfect time, or for pure hearts. God came into our messy, complicated world to be with us in the midst of the messiness. In

the midst of the complications – in the midst of the mistakes we make. In the midst of both sorrow and joy. This is our hope at Christmas, and always. God is with us. May we say yes to being *with* God, with each other and with all of creation, today and every day, in Jesus name. Amen.