

4 Advent – Year A – December 19, 2010
Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
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We have a lot of new to consider today. ‘New’ can often be a mixed bag, sometimes wondrous, beautiful and joyful, and sometimes scary, disturbing, or upsetting. Let’s think about all the new things we’ve experienced in our lives and the feelings associated with them. New school, new friends. New job, new city. New spouse, new baby. New car, new house. New life, new love. New vision, new insight. New shoes, new clothes. New technology, new beginnings. All the new years we have celebrated. All that’s new in our lives, and all that’s about to be born anew.

Today’s Gospel reading might appear be more of a Christmas reading, rather than the Good News for the fourth Sunday of Advent. But there’s a lot in here that we need to question and clarify before we are ready to welcome our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. From the opening line, Matthew directs us to think of new beginnings. Matthew says, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” There are other words in Greek that are more apt descriptions of birth, but the word Matthew chooses to describe Jesus’ birth is “*genesis*”. It’s a short step to recalling the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, which in English is titled the Book of Genesis, from the Hebrew meaning beginning. The link Matthew is making is quite intentionally, so that we understand Jesus’ birth as divinely initiated. This is no ordinary birth, or even a miraculous conception like that of Isaac, Abraham and Sarah’s son born late in their lives, or Hannah’s son, Samuel, conceived after a prolonged period of barrenness, or even Elizabeth’s son, John the Baptist, also conceived in her old age. As we read in the Book of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2 KJV). God’s intervention in human affairs, God’s new beginning in Jesus Christ, also involves the Holy Spirit. Matthew says that Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s Gospel at the annunciation, the angel of the Lord tells Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Matthew’s point is obvious. He draws the parallels, and constantly refers to the fulfillment of prophetic scriptures so that we can see the continuity of God’s work in the whole history of salvation. The birth of Jesus will be a new beginning for all of creation. You and I, as hearers of the word, are in a privileged position. Those actually involved in the events have a rather different perspective.

Luke’s Gospel account describes the birth of Jesus – that is, God’s new beginning in Christ Jesus – from Mary’s perspective. Matthew’s Gospel focuses on Joseph’s point of view. Mary is Joseph’s new wife, in Law if not yet through the completion of the marital rituals, and nuptial consummation. No doubt, he’s looking forward to his new life with Mary, making plans for their new home and God willing, their new family. Finding out that Mary is already pregnant is not part of the plan, and suddenly all the joy and anticipation is ripped from his heart. This is not going to be the perfect marriage. In fact, as far as Joseph is concerned, this is not going to be a marriage at all. The Law described in the Book of Deuteronomy speaks to just such a situation, where a bride-to-be is found to be pregnant by another man. Joseph has a tough choice to make. Should he allow Mary to be publicly humiliated and stoned to death; or quietly write a note of divorce? Being unwilling to disgrace Mary, he has chosen the latter option.

We might think at this point, that Joseph would not just be incredibly disappointed, but pretty angry at Mary. Few, if any of us, have faced precisely this same situation, but we have all experienced the emotions of disappointment and anger. Neither of these feelings is likely to facilitate our nearness to God or our ability to hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. In fact, strong emotions like these tend to make us blind and deaf, as well as making us feel empty, alone, and distanced from God. The fact that Joseph listens to the angel who comes to him in a dream and proceeds to take Mary as his wife, is really a miracle of God’s grace. Joseph is

described as a righteous man. In all likelihood, every fiber of his being was calling out to God for answers to his most pressing questions about Mary and her surprise pregnancy; and about what he should do. His new life with Mary is nothing like he planned, yet Joseph remains attentive to God's will. And more than just attentive, Joseph trusts and remains faithful to what he believes is God's commandment to marry Mary.

How often have we busily worked towards all kinds of things in our lives that just didn't turn out the way we had planned or expected. Did you notice the hand of God at work at the time, or later? I, for one, was busily working my way up a corporate ladder, when God intervened in a major way and redirected my steps into a new path. For Joseph, Mary's unexpected pregnancy was probably not his idea of a blessing from God, at least at first. Mary also had questions for God's messenger. Both received the assurance of God, and their questions were transformed to quiet confidence and obedience to God's will. But what about our questions? We're a long way from that first advent, and first Christmas. Even as we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come", Christ's glorious return does not appear to be imminent. Only God knows that day and time. However, while we wait, we've grown accustomed to our modern rituals of preparing for Christmas. Or maybe I should say we've become more comfortable with the rhythm of the seasons established by modern culture. There is seemingly less emphasis on making sure our spiritual homes are in good order, and rather more emphasis on making sure our physical homes are ready for family and guests.

If we are fighting a tide of cultural complacency concerning the miracle of the incarnation, simply drowning in a sea of consumerism, or finding that our own plans and expectations are taking a higher priority, that cannot be said of Mary and Joseph. In the same way that other miraculous births are announced in Scripture, the angelic messenger in Joseph's dream tells him that Mary will bear a son, and that he is to name him Jesus, thereby formally adopting him into the Davidic line. The final element of this pattern of annunciation is to specify the child's identity. In this case, the angel says of Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins." Now that is truly a unique identity. This little child is to be the savior.

As you and I contemplate what God may have planned that is new for us this season, or on this final Sunday of Advent, one thing that we are being called to consider is why we still need a savior. That's a rather risky question. One that is scary, because the answer might demand that we change the way we live. Modern living has become synonymous with independence, scientific breakthroughs, and access to all kinds of information and knowledge. Amazingly enough none of these things can even come close to answering our question. We're treading on new ground now, probably more tentatively than boldly. We have to reach beyond ourselves, to acknowledge in humility that we are dependent on God, that we do not know everything, and that God has often surprised us by changing our sure fire plans in surprising ways. On a radio talk show, a recovering drug addict told the story of his first step to recovery. He had locked himself into a hotel room to take care of his six hundred dollar-a-day habit. By God's grace, this time something was different. He finally realized that whenever he turned to drugs to fill the hole in his life he went off to be alone, isolating himself from others. He turned his back on everyone in order to minister to his own needs. What a powerful image this is of what sin looks like in our lives. According to Professor Daniel Harris, "Sin is the choice to turn away from our savior's gifts and care, to minister to ourselves." Removing ourselves from community is one way to try and keep God at arm's length, while we're busy trying to save ourselves. During these weeks of Advent, probably more than a few of us have found ways to minister to ourselves, perhaps through shopping, addictions, or even through determined self-reliance. With all that is new and challenging in our lives, who amongst us can doubt that we need our savior more than ever. Who amongst us can say that they are without sin? There is only one savior, Jesus Christ. May the God of all grace help us to make our hearts ready to receive Him again this Christmas.

Amen.