

# Sermon: Advent 7

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December 18, 2016

Year A

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

I rarely give my sermons a title... but this time... there was a title that spoke to me... it didn't come in a dream... as God's voice did to Joseph... but because of who the Gospel reveals Joseph to be... I'm calling it: *Joseph was a Real Mensch*... literally... a *mensch* is a person... but in this context... it means that Joseph was a mature... admirable... unselfish human being...

It's Advent 7... we've been waiting for seven weeks now... for what's to come *next* week... we are sometimes exhorted... to Be Here Now... to live in the moment... and Matthew 6:34 reminds us... do not worry about tomorrow... for tomorrow will bring worries of its own... but even though our seven-week Advent reminds us what we're *really* waiting for... the fulfillment of God's plan for all of creation... even as we wait for Emmanuel... God with us... it's difficult to keep our attention focused on what's *not* here now... when there are so many other things that are here now... clamoring for... demanding our attention right now...

We think we're waiting for a vacation from our routine... students are waiting for Christmas Break... we think we're waiting for good weather so we can get to where we're going... or so family and friends can get to us... we think we're waiting for the tree to be positioned and decorated... though many of us have already done that... we're waiting for the holiday menu to come together... for the final gifts to be bought and wrapped... and there is anxiety in some of that waiting... will we be disappointed... will we be satisfied... will the day exceed all manner of expectations... and some of us wait for the grief that is felt during this season to let go of us... and to melt into peace...

King Ahaz was anxious for peace... the allied forces of Aram and Ephraim... were attempting to attack Jerusalem... and he was deeply afraid... in v. 10 God offered Ahaz a sign... any sign he wanted... to convince him to trust in God... but Ahaz refused the sign... saying he will not put God to the test... it seems that he is piously following God's law... but as Isaiah points out... the King is missing the point of God's offer... Ahaz does not test God by accepting God's offer... instead God is testing Ahaz... and when Ahaz refuses... he refuses to trust in the living God who is speaking to him... it was almost scandalous...

And our Gospel today describes a truly scandalous situation... Mary was engaged to Joseph... but before they lived together... she was found to be with child... Joseph would have been within his legal rights to dismiss her and expose her to public humiliation... because even though they were only betrothed... when Mary was found to be with child... it was no different than if they'd been married and Mary committed adultery...

But *when* this was discovered... Joseph resolved to dismiss her quietly... but then a dream broke in... and softened his resolve... an angel said... *Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife... her child is of the Holy Spirit... and you will call him Jesus...*

Joseph trusted God who spoke to him through an angel... he became as receptive to God's dream... as Mary had been to the Holy Spirit... he emptied himself of his own dreams... and gave up much... he gave up his legal rights to send Mary away... gave up consummating their marriage until the child was born... gave up his paternal right to choose his own name... he let go of his own dreams... in favor of the dream that had overshadowed him... Joseph the carpenter... was a righteous man... and he became a paternal womb as it were... who would protect Mary and this holy child... he extended forgiveness to what looked like sin... he built a response of love in a world of law... because to fulfill the law... you must go beyond it...

I have entertained a few dreams in my life... I wanted to become a chiropractor... a speech pathologist... and an elementary school teacher... but I didn't dream about ordination... until I recognized in myself... God's dream that was being lived out in others who'd already been ordained... until my resolve for something else... melted into God's resolve for me...

It's Advent 7... we're on the cusp of Emmanuel... of God actually being with us... it's fitting to look ahead to the Incarnation... it's a fitting acknowledgement of Joseph's receptivity to dreams... as we consider what it is... that we are receptive to...

Richard Rohr recently wrote... that Julian of Norwich... experienced her showings... as she called her visions... all on one night... probably May 8, 1373... it was such a profound experience... that she asked the bishop to enclose her in a small room... called an anchor-hold... that was attached to her church... from a window that looked into the sanctuary... she would attend mass... and from an outside window... she would counsel those who came to visit her... Julian lived in the anchor-hold for perhaps twenty years... and spent those years trying to communicate everything she experienced in that one night...

One chapter of her writings describes the union of the soul within the Trinity... the mystics always go to the Trinitarian level because here... God is more a verb than a noun... God is more a flow more than a substance... God is an experience more than an old man sitting on a throne.... and we all live and move and have our being... inside that flow of love...

*Julian wrote: Greatly ought we to rejoice that God dwells in our soul; and more greatly ought we to rejoice that our soul dwells in God. Our soul is created to be God's dwelling place, and the dwelling of our soul is God. It is a great understanding to see and know inwardly that God, who is our creator, dwells in our soul... and it is a far greater understanding to see and know inwardly that our soul... which is created... dwells in*

*God in substance... of which substance... through God... we are what we are. And I saw no difference between God and our substance, but, as it were, all God... and still my understanding accepted that our substance is in God.*

Intimacy implies two-ness... but two-ness overcome and enjoyed... Julian preserves the differentiation of the dance of partners... she is not a pantheist... she is not saying everything is God... she is saying everything is in God and God is in everything—which is panentheism.

In less than a week... some of our waiting will be over... and we'll gather to celebrate that flow of Love... we may still wait for good weather... or to find out what's in the box with the blue paper and the red bow... or to find out whether anyone's brave enough to talk about politics or religion at the dinner table... but what we most deeply wait for... what our souls long for... what no earthly thing or circumstance can satisfy... but what we may glimpse in a moment of transcendence... and know as real and worthwhile... are for God's dreams to pervade and sustain the universe...

And we wait for our own resolve... to be like Joseph's... not to be carved as Laws on stone... but to be written on hearts of flesh... and to be finally fulfilled by going beyond them... and that will certainly exceed all of our Advent expectations... and make all the waiting... truly worthwhile...

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