

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Paul Eldred
December 18th, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It finally happened this week. After resisting for so long, I succumbed to that upcoming holiday – the one we haven’t started celebrating yet – and I listened to Christmas music. Even worse, I even sang along! And I know, during this time of waiting we call Advent we have to be patient. I was doing so well too! My end of the semester reading and writing was perfectly accompanied by the meditative and anticipatory music of Advent as I awaited both Christ’s coming and the coming end of my school work. The Church tells us to spend this time to prepare ourselves for Christmas – and if you were here last week, you know that I even preached about that from this very pulpit! So I confess to you, my siblings in Christ, that I am already looking forward to the end of this week with joyous anticipation and living into that Christmas spirit a bit.

And while I was feeling a little ashamed for my jumping ahead on my Christmas celebrations, as I prepared to preach on this morning’s gospel text, I saw that the creators of our lectionary also jumped ahead! Here we are in the

fourth week and final of Advent, so close to the finish line, and we hear Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth. Sure, there aren't any shepherds, there isn't a manger scene with animals around, and we only get one angel, but this is all that is said about Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew. But Matthew's telling really isn't about the remarkable nature of the birth of Jesus as much as it is about what led up to it. We can sometimes see how each gospel book can have a different perspective on the events of Jesus' life and in this case, Matthew is less concerned about what happened at the actual birth of Jesus as he is with linking it with Isaiah's prophecies of the coming Messiah.

The portion of the Book of Isaiah we heard this morning takes place around seven centuries before Jesus. The Kingdom of Judah was under great threat from its neighbors who were looking to attack and King Ahaz was desperate for a sign of God's protection. Through the Prophet Isaiah, God gave the people of Judah hope through the foretelling of this sign – a “young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” And before this child is even old enough to eat, the threat of the kingdoms you fear will be gone and their lands will be deserted. When Judah's enemies surrounded them, God promised a sign to remind them that God is with them.

I wonder how King Ahaz reacted to this prophecy. With the threat of powerful enemies preparing for attack, I would imagine that Ahaz would have

much preferred God's sign to be a mighty army or a great general or a divine lightning bolt directed at his foes – something concrete to defeat his enemies. But instead, he is promised a baby as a reminder of God's presence. It's as if God is telling him, 'Look at this new life coming forth in your midst – look at the love this mother has for her newborn son and be reminded of my love for my people. Listen to her name her son and every time she calls his name, let it be a reminder to you that I am with you.'

Seven centuries later, the people of Israel were living under occupation by the Roman Empire. Taxes were tough, most people worked hard labor just to get by, and many longed for freedom and independence. It was into this reality that Jesus would be born and Matthew intentionally links Jesus' birth with the prophecy Isaiah gave to King Ahaz all those years before. Matthew tells his people that while these foreign powers are dominating the land, God reminds them through the birth of a baby that God is there with them. But this time, it's even more than a reminder – this time, God will be born into their world through this little baby. Matthew's gospel gives us two names for this baby – Emmanuel, "God is with us," and Jesus, or in Hebrew Yeshua, which means "God saves." Once again, Matthew tells us, God responds to the oppression of enemies not with a great army, but with a tiny baby whose very name reminds us that God *is* with us and that God saves us. In a world that craves vengeance or the crushing of one's enemies, God's sign comes through

the new life of a baby. And this baby reminds us that God stands in solidarity with us – that God knows what we are going through – that God is empowering us to be God’s presence in the world. God doesn’t come through an army to kill God’s enemies, but comes among us and with us so we can be signs of God’s presence for all who are in desperate need of it.

In Advent, we once again await the coming of this sign, this new life, and this reminder of God’s presence among us. We know our desperate need for God’s presence in our world. We see the atrocities of Aleppo and the faces of the Syrian refugees. We see the brokenness of a system where people work multiple full-time jobs and still struggle to put food on the table. We see the needs we have in our own lives to be reminded of God’s presence. And through this coming baby, we are reminded that God is with us – God stands with us – God empowers us to be God’s presence in the world.

This week, I am reminded of that old Shakespearean question, “What’s in a name?” Matthew tells us this week of two names given to this coming child – Jesus, God saves, and Emmanuel, God with us. Today we also are singing through the ancient hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” – based off the 7 names of Jesus that have been repeated by Christians for centuries in the final days of Advent. These names each come from prophecy in Isaiah and remind us what we know about this child whose birth we are eagerly awaiting.

O Come, Wisdom – the Divine Word of God made flesh through whom the world was made.

O Come, Lord – giver of the law whose righteousness and faithfulness knows no bounds.

O Come, Branch of Jesse – restorer of David’s dynasty and perfect ruler of all God’s people.

O Come, Key of David – liberator of the house of Israel who frees all captives living under oppression.

O Come, Morning Star – bringer of light to the world and enlightener of those who live in darkness.

O Come, King of Nations – Prince of Peace who rules over the whole world a reign of love and justice for all people.

O Come, Emmanuel – Reminder that God is with us and stands with us and empowers us to be God’s presence in the world that is so desperate for a sign.

O Come.

Amen.