

Sunday, 18 December 2016

Advent 4- get uncomfortable if you want to join God

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

The stores are packed with everything you need to have the perfect Christmas. The variety is staggering- shelves and shelves of evergreen branches, Santa statues, and lights for your house. For those of us with fake Christmas trees they even sell a real Christmas tree smell, so you can feel like you have a real tree. The stores ring with Frank Sinatra, and Bing Crosby singing Christmas songs. The magazines on the stand boast perfect holiday dishes and decorations. Then there are the toys! Nearly life-size Darth Vader action figures, and dolls of every imaginable variety. Even the pet aisle is celebrating the holidays.

While some are planning the perfect Christmas experience, others are finding it difficult to get in the spirit. Some have experienced a death that the holidays seem to highlight with an empty chair at the table. Some are dealing with family problems that just never seem to get better. Some don't even really know why they aren't into it, they just aren't feeling much cheer. They feel out of step with what is going on around them. Everyone is planning a perfect holiday and their lives feel so far from perfect they don't even want to try.

The first Christmas was more of the out of step variety. God often seems to move out of step with the usual social expectations. Things would go a lot smoother if it was the High Priest's wife the angel had come to visit with news about being pregnant with the messiah. She would have already been married and they could avoid that awkward pregnant and not married thing. Joseph wouldn't have to struggle with what to do with his pregnant fiancé. Of course he knew it wasn't his. Why should he raise another man's child? Why should he take on another man's responsibility? No, better to dismiss her quietly. But, he doesn't want her to get hurt- he doesn't want her to get stoned for fornication. But, It's not fair that he should have to marry her. What would people think? They would think he was the fornicator- messing around before being married. No, best to do this quietly- as best you can in a small town. And this story about an angel, c'mon, really? That's the story she wants to go with?

The whole thing is absolutely scandalous. Better to just distance himself from the whole thing. It's not decent. It's not the life he had planned for himself. I would imagine that is how things would have looked for Joseph.

Of course that's how God seems to work. God interrupts our comfortable lives, and turns our expectations upside down. When the angel comes to Mary and tells her she will Have God's son she sings a song that includes the lines,

“he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and

exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Lk 1:51-53).

The normal order of things is upset. God disturbs our comfortable social expectations. If we expect God to move in our lives, then we should expect to be made uncomfortable. We should expect our usual ways of being to be disturbed. We should perhaps even expect scandal.

Joseph could have dismissed Mary and gone on with his life- a life in keeping with the social norms of his community- a life that didn't rock the boat. He could have went on to have a family and apply his trade to support them. Instead Joseph is thrown into scandal. Shortly after the child is born he even has to become a refugee and flee to Egypt. This is not the plan he made for himself.

I think we can be a lot like Joseph, when he wants to dismiss Mary. We want to go about our business. We want to accomplish our modest goals and not cause too much trouble. We want to be good people. We want to avoid having too much drama in our lives if at all possible. We want to be comfortable. Most of us don't feel the need to be famous, or to strive to be billionaires. We just want enough that we don't have to worry about it and can have a few nice things. We want family and friends that are healthy, and work that keeps our interest without being overwhelming. That's what most of us want. I think we can understand Joseph wanting to dismiss Mary quietly, can't we?

But imagine what he would have missed? Joseph would have missed his calling. He would have missed his call to be a father to the Messiah. He would have missed out on the heroic task of keeping him and his mother safe. He would have missed teaching Jesus how to be a man. He would have missed playing an incredible part of God's story in our world. Joseph could have missed out.

Is it possible that we miss out when we decide to keep our lives normal, according to plan, according to social expectation? When we choose to not have our comfortable lives disturbed is it possible that we are missing out on what God is doing right in front of us? Is it possible that we are missing our calling because we have chosen comfort instead? That part of our life that we want to just go away, is it possible that that is exactly where God is trying to speak to us?

Joseph found that sometimes being faithful meant being at odds with society. It was in those unusual circumstances that Joseph saw God working in his life. Joseph stayed faithful to Mary even though society made him feel that he should walk away from her. It was in violating convention that Joseph found himself in God's will. God often seems to work in the unexpected. He works in the interruption.

Joseph took a chance. He had a dream where an angel spoke to him and told him to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife (1:20). It was fear that was holding him back- fear of what people might say- fear of his life being disturbed- fear of his life not going according to his plan- fear that

Mary was lying about the angel and her pregnancy. Joseph decided not to allow that fear to lead him. Instead he chose to follow the dream that strangely spoke about a baby that would save people- with no clue about how that was supposed to happen. He wasn't given a map of where they were going. He was just asked to walk through a door with only a vague idea of what would happen after that. He was off his map, but he walked onto God's map.

Many of us live our lives wondering where God is and what God is doing. Maybe... just maybe... God has been trying to interrupt our lives. Maybe he has come to us as the irritating interruption, or the inconvenient neighbour. Maybe he comes to us, but answering Him means deviating from the plan we have drawn up for ourselves. What if we are left wondering where God is and what God is doing because we have been expecting God to work with our plans and in the convenience of our lives? Maybe we miss out on what God is doing when we aren't willing to be interrupted, and maybe that leaves us with a sense of distance from God.

The poet David Whyte has a poem called The True Love where he says, the call "will not come so grandly, so Biblically, but more subtly and intimately, in the face of the one you know you have to love." [1] Perhaps as we prepare for the perfect Christmas we can make ourselves ready to be interrupted- confronted- by "the face of the one [we] know [we] have to love". Perhaps as we rush from one thing to the next we can notice God trying to speak to us in some unusual way- some inconvenient way- calling

us off our own map and onto His. Perhaps we can allow ourselves to not allow the fear to decide for us. Maybe we can become willing to be made uncomfortable and find God there