

ISAIAH 7:10-16

PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19

ROMANS 1:1-7

MATTHEW 1:18-25

Fourth Sunday of Advent; Love

December 18, 2022; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

It's a Birthday!

Several years ago in a former church, the annual topic of conversation that usually takes place this time of year in some churches began to be tossed around like a live grenade. It was the usual question about the virgin birth, the typical “Did she or didn’t she?” “Was she or wasn’t she?” As I have said, in a variety of congregational contexts, the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth has created a crisis for some believers, a line in the sand that many simply cannot cross with integrity, the heart not willing to embrace what the mind cannot accept. I stole that last line from the late John Shelby Spong! For many sincere and faithful Christians, the virgin birth, along with a host of other dogmatic and doctrinal requirements held captive in the historic creeds is just plainly and simply irrelevant. Yes, however, just like at the manger at the inn, there is room for everybody! So, just relax and we will slowly together take the proverbial air out of the tire this morning, releasing a little pressure. After all, churches like ours do not have litmus tests for orthodoxy and so there is plenty of room whichever view any one of us happens to take. Just remember, Isaiah’s prophecy spoke of a young woman or a maiden, lending Matthew his subtly nuanced language in his unique rendition of the birth story! And besides, divinely virginal births were commonplace in the ancient world, a way to honor someone thought to be holy or royal! **But back to my riveting story! The church administrator was quite alarmed to learn, disturbed, even shocked, to discover that some among the congregation rejected outright any literal, factual, historical, event, any magical or miraculous happening allowing for a virgin to conceive and give birth. In exasperated frustration, she asked me point blank, “How can you celebrate Christmas if you do not believe in the virgin birth?” I responded calmly and quickly, assertively and assuredly, that the answer was quite simple, easily given. We are celebrating the birth of Jesus! We are celebrating a birthday, not the means, not**

the “how”! As Katherine Willis Pershey commented on today’s lections in *The Christian Century*, “The only two places I’ve heard people gossip about someone’s virginity are the pulpit and the high school girl’s bathroom!”

While Jesus’ birth almost assuredly did not occur on December 25th, if taken literally the nativity stories seeming to indicate a midsummer sequence of events, we know that on a certain day in the calendar year the very real man of history, Jesus of Nazareth, was born. In that fact there simply can be no argument, no debate or disagreement. Even the Roman historian Pliny referred to the reality of a certain Christos who had to be eliminated because he was causing too much of a ruckus for the Roman authorities who precariously controlled occupied Israel. So, while conversations are interesting and abounding, while debates are acceptable, most appropriate, in Bible study settings, the biblical narrative giving competing, if not opposing, images, I would argue that our best course of action, at least for today, is to focus on a birth. Yes, I have been known in during my preaching career to do otherwise in other congregational contexts, preaching head on this subject from the pulpit. Today is not that day! So, today we celebrate the birth of Jesus, wishing him and all of us a very happy birthday, call it holy or royal, but definitely call it real.

Yes, today is a day to celebrate, to use a biblical image, to cry out to God with great rejoicing lest the stones be forced to praise the name of the Holy One. We can all quickly acknowledge verbatim all that is wrong in our world, our memories clogged with an overabundance, all the bad stuff that seeks to overwhelm us and diminish our human capacity, even destroying many innocent lives in the process, making us jaded and somewhat cynical, yes, derisively questioning even the best of God’s presumed blessings. But on this day, as we stand at the precipice of another Christmas, excitedly anticipating the birth of Jesus and the continuing birth of the Christly Spirit within us and among us, once again, somehow, we must find ways to cast everything aside that dampens our spirits, put behind us every challenge that seeks to depress us or even to divide and conquer us as a global village, and indeed, gladly embrace our greatest rejoicing in what we believe to be a holy, royal, birth. Every now and again we need to wallow in some good news, to bask in the glow of the goodness and grace that we believe is always lurking in the shadows, somewhere hidden in the midst of our human dilemmas and indifference, our individual and collective depression and despondency, it at all possible, knowing for some, especially at this time of year, the improbability, no, the impossibility, of

doing so. No matter how bleak or dire things may be, no matter how challenging, our everyday lives and living, seems to be, let us pause and praise. Thank God everything is not always as it appears! There is a silver lining, a bright light at the end of life's tunnels. So, yes, on this day, let's call a truce to whatever troubles us, to even block out the miseries that negatively affect our planet and our people, and let's offer our unbridled thanks and praise.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Rome, reminds these faithful Roman converts to Christ, that whatever he was as an evangelistic missionary, as a make-it-up-as-you-go theologian, yes, always looking through a dark looking glass, that in his heart he believed he was set apart to spread God's good news, yes, to share the gospel of Christ, to be a spokesperson for all that is right in God's realm amidst all that was wrong. Paul's version of the Christmas story was a simple one found in Galatians Four (4), "He was born of a woman!" No surprise there! Nothing new! Nothing unusual! Nothing to see here, or there! Don't get excited! We would have only stopped the presses, utterly shocked, had he declared, had he even suggested, that Jesus was born of a man! As fellow theology nerds Tripp Fuller and Daniel Kirk note in what I believe to be a podcast called "How Paul Preaches Christmas, from their website *Homebrewed Christianity*, "No manger! No mamma! No angels! No problem!" Paul, like Ahaz and Joseph in our other lections today, knows himself to be a servant of God boldly expressing his faith, preaching the gospel, proclaiming this good news, as best he knew how to do.

As with many back in the day, Paul believed that the Hebrew Bible was a precursor, a predictor of the coming Christ, a Messiah who would be fully manifest, according to his followers after his death, in the person of Jesus. While many of us today will not go as far as Paul did in this kind of thinking, revealed in the prophetic words written in the Hebrew Bible, a view that is called supersessionism, falsely interpreting and understanding the Christian scriptures primarily if not solely in light of and as fulfillment of the promises of old. Yes, this was standard belief for the early Church who believed that indeed prophecies had come to pass and were happening in real time in the emergence and evolution of the young faith movement centered on the man from Nazareth, the place where he was probably, actually, born! We will give them their due for making this grandest assumption about the salvation history, the narrative story, of their Hebrew forebears! For those who had once been traditional Jews, including Paul the former Pharisee, we can only imagine the glorious glee these

proselytes, proclaiming with ecstatic exuberance their joy as newly minted followers of Jesus. Surely they beamed with pride as they all must have felt a certain satisfaction, as they leaned into this completion of the story, the fulfillment of ancient texts now revealed in a new expression of what literally was now an authentic, genuine, Judeo-Christian experience. You will remember, or perhaps not, that many of Jesus' disciples, including the apostle Peter, believed in their heart of hearts that they were still loyal Jews, that nothing had changed, at least as to the religious affiliation of their birth, and just like their mentor and teacher Jesus, never had a conversion to what had yet to be named as Christian, and eventually, Christianity. For them, the cart never was put before the proverbial horse!

Paul reminds his Roman constituents that the gospel once was seemingly and erroneously reserved exclusively for the heirs of Israel, a proprietary faith intended for Jewish adherents. The good news was now unbound and unlimited, freely open and available to the Gentiles, a most radical development that many traditionalists no doubt viewed as heretical, unfathomable and untenable. "The very idea" as my southern mother used to say! It is hard for us to imagine the radicality at stake when considering any evangelistic engagement, any missionary encounter, intentionally shared with the likes of those who had always been rendered and labeled as unclean, the very walking and talking, the very epitome, the very embodiment of human pollution. When we turn aside and read these narratives, we take all these developments in stride as if they were commonplace, routine, ordinary, when in fact they represented the far extreme of God's welcome and inclusion, divine hospitality on steroids. My God, just think about it, Jesus had set the lowest bar, the bottom of the barrel in his nonexistent standards, opening avenues, venues of faithful living considered anathema by traditionalists after his death, yes meeting with much resistance, even among those closest to him who should have known better by then, the apostle Peter a quintessential example of disdain and disapproval. He fully embraced everyone he encountered, sans their sins, or at least he desperately tried! Samaritans and women, the lame and mentally ill, those with blemish who could never see the intimate insides of the temple, tax collectors and even Roman Centurions who were not an exception but a golden rule. But now all bets were off, and everyone was invited to the table, the metaphor of the Great Banquet Feast now in play. In this one born into the purest of a Jewish heritage, well, save for those four scandalous women in Matthew's female genealogy who were suspect, outsiders, aliens, foreigners, strangers, you

know, Tamar, who pretended to be a prostitute and committed an incestuous act leading to a child, Rahab, an out prostitute, Ruth the foreigner, and Bathsheba unfairly labeled the seductress, all ironically having well-earned and unjustified reputations, once Jesus saw the light for himself, converting because of the profound witness, the testimony of a Gentile, a Canaanite or Syrophenician woman who without hesitation proudly declared she would gladly eat like the dogs who scavenged the scraps from the master's table. Jesus suddenly got it and quickly shifted gears and began a mission and ministry of removing all the walls, every partition, once reserved for the household of Israel, welcoming everyone, especially including all Gentiles, to God's grandest buffet, invited to dine at an inclusively welcoming table, a smorgasbord overflowing with all God's hospitably gracious goodness. There were now no more boundaries, no more borders, nothing but open windows, open doors. Yes, a child would lead them, but oh what a man, a mature adult, he became!

And so on this Sunday as Advent gives way to Christmas we retell the story, embracing its beauty along with its idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies, no matter how we receive it, literally or mythologically, knowing that at the core of this fantastic tale there really was a birth, and this one born in a welcomingly hospitable stable became the stuff of legend and history, a story that more than 2000 years later still has traction and attraction, every word music to the ears of those who have heard even the faintest call to come and follow. We know, beyond a shadow of all doubt, that in choosing to follow the man of Nazareth, our lives and our world are made better and will be better. The message from this very human, human being, given every flatteringly exalted title once reserved for the Caesar, something to which Jesus did not aspire and even denounced, transcends every faith perspective, every efficaciously affirming thought that any human being has ever had, exceeding the limited bounds of every belief, every religion, a pattern, a paradigm, befitting persons of faith and no faith whatsoever. Do unto others! Love others and self, and if you can love God, do that as well! Be giving! Turn the other cheek, as we do our best to keep the peace as fragile as peace has been proven to be, peacemaking so far removed from our radar as we circle the wagons of our own tribal worlds. These are not Christian values! They are not Jewish values! They are human values! Yes, for the sake and survival of our humanity! And for those who buy into any, even the slightest idea representing God, whatever constitutes a supreme being or even those who interpret the mystery of holiness as a mysterious energy in the universe, anything

that might inspire awe and wonder, these core values are divine values! For, from our very limited perspective, we know that whatever God is, whatever defines the nature of the Holy, that God is love, the essence of love, and Jesus embodied that love in ways that seemed to make him one of one, breaking the mold in every way imaginable. Whatever it was and however it occurred, Jesus fully encapsulated the very presence of God, evidently in a way unlike anyone before or after him. It is this most unique presence that caused the Church to claim for the man of history and humble birth, the most common of origins, verbally anointing him with both a human and divine identity, yes, a delightfully split personality, surely certain, claiming, that he was the embodiment of God on earth, yes, the very incarnation of holiness! To use a popular phrase today, "Game changer!" If we catch but an echo, a glimpse, or a glimmer, even the slightest hint, we will attain enough of his vibe, enough of his mojo, to last for a lifetime, our lifetimes, and long into whatever constitutes eternity. We will have enough, all that we need for the journey! All luggage! No baggage!

Yes, today is a day to revel in the promises of God, promises made, promises kept, promises fulfilled! The Psalmist shouts with glee on this holy day that God's face has shined upon us that we might be saved, salvation being a holistic understanding of body, mind, and soul, emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. It has nothing to do with any evangelistic nonsense, concepts, confessions, ideas, the refrains of repetitional public professions of faith, that were never on the biblical writers' radar, especially anything in writing associated with the prophets of old. Yes, God desires to make us complete, to make us whole, individually and corporately, building communities that reflect the realm of God on earth as revealed in Christ Jesus. Therein is the move from lost to found, from lostness to awareness! Welcome to the ultimate lost and found department! The Psalmist reminds readers then and all of us now that we have been fed to our fullest, our thirst quenched, but it is up to us, we must seize the opportunity to take hold of these eternally manifest and graciously mysterious and scrumptious goodies, gifts of goodness and gloriously divine presence. In the final analysis, like a horse to water, we are responsible for our wellbeing, we are accountable as to whether we grab with gusto, squeezing every ounce out of them, yes, for all they are worth, grasping all the blessings of life and living that are ours to behold, following Jesus as we go.

The writer of what came to be called the eightieth Psalm makes an interesting point, saying, “You’ve put us at odds with our neighbors! Our enemies make fun of us!” I think it interesting that this translator chose the word “neighbor!” These sobering declarations are a reminder that many of our closest family and friends will not always agree with the faithful pathway we have chosen to tread, specifically theologically speaking. Many will disagree, yes, vehemently so! Sometimes our welcomingly inclusive, radically hospitable ways, will challenge tradition and the myriad preconceptions of the biblical narrative that seem to outright reject and condemn, exclude, and judge. Just remember, dear friends, and I say so without hesitation or reservation, Jesus is on your side! Jesus welcomed, included, and affirmed everyone and so must we and so do we as local missional beloved faith community. Let the naysayers “nay!” Be bold! Be brave! Be proud! As Jesus said, it is an honor when you are persecuted for defending his honor and his name, for following in his oft lonely footsteps, hopefully making the hugest footprints imaginable. Yes, within this vast faithful enterprise called Christianity, this massive global Christendom with its layer upon layer of multiple expressions, theologically and ecclesially, let us have the stamina to stand firm, to toe the line, always without fail, “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, vulnerably open. We stand on the right side of the gospel and history! May that be our testimony, our witness, the cross, our cross, on which we are willing to die, for Jesus reminded his followers, closest disciples especially included, that death was the way when owning and declaring his brand of righteousness! It is impossible to follow Jesus without taking up whatever constitutes our personally, specifically, created, defined, and labeled cross! Just name it!

I offer a reminder today, that while last week was all about Mary, this week is all about Joseph, a mysterious figure wrapped in much enigma, a humble carpenter father who quickly falls off the scene, vanishing without leaving a trace, almost as if he was never there as he came and went in a hurry. It was as if he was put in the witness protection program. Maybe he went undercover! He is not even allowed the dignity in the Gospels of suffering a tragic death, of having his death announced, always a convenient way to eliminate a conspicuous character in a story! Talk about a cross to bear! Joseph had to swallow hard and swallow the wildest tale, the craziest story, that his betrothed, his young wife to be, was pregnant even as he knew beyond a shadow of all doubt that he surely, certainly, was not the baby daddy! Literalizing the story, Joseph did a noble thing, even if nudged by the voices in his head that he

believed to be the very angelic mouthpiece of God. He is a hero in the story despite being a bit player, given short shrift as a subordinate character assigned to a majorly perfunctory duty. I guess what I am suggesting is that we need a lot of Marys and we need a lot of Josephs in this faithful enterprise, this divine exercise, we call Christianity as we seek to follow one very special offspring of this unsuspecting and expecting couple! Yes, it is a reminder that it takes all of us, that each and every one of us are essentially important in our efforts of helping him be born anew in the world, being about the blessed business of spreading gloriously gracious good news, yes, the gospel, of Jesus, the one who came to be called Messiah, the Christ. Do not underestimate yourself, do not sell yourself short, for all of us are called and chosen, even if the Gospel writer does suggest otherwise in a certain narrative.

So, as we leave the anxious waiting and watching of Advent, the exciting anticipatory hope, peace, joy, and love leading to exuberant fulfillment at Christmastide, be born anew in your faith this day. Do not sweat the small stuff! Remember that every human being, all of us are valued and loved, blessed with this one life, and are oh so very needed, necessary contributors, essential workers, each one imbued with the very Spirit of God engrained within our being, all of us a mirror, a reflection, created in the divine image. Yes, the very gene of the Christ is deeply and delightfully embedded within us! Each one of us possess a little bit of Jesus! It is our job to tap into it and make the most of it! So, be of good cheer and let us be the faithful people we long and strive to be! May the same Spirit that came over Ahaz, that came over Mary and then Joseph, and would eventually come over the young man Jesus, and Paul and everyone in the early Church, may it overcome and overwhelm us, touching us with much grace, inspiring and inspiriting us for all the good works we will accomplish in the name of the Holy One! And so, do remember, that it is all about a birth, Jesus' birth! It's a birthday! Happy birthday, Jesus!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to be born anew again and again and again in Jesus, following in some very large footsteps, yes, making footprints as we go! Amen and amen.