

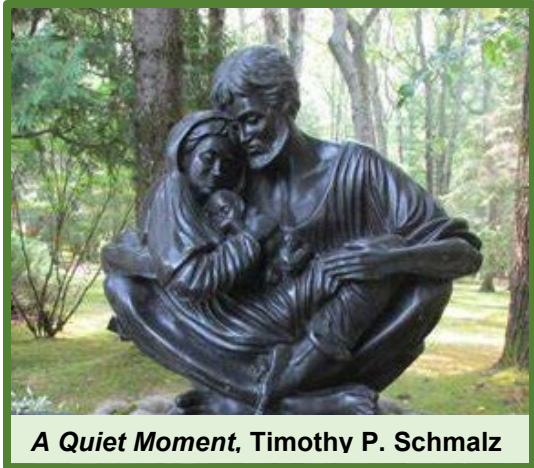
REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ 18 DECEMBER 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Litledale

“Emmanuel ~ God-with-us” – on this fourth Sunday of Advent, we rejoice that we have been blessed with the wisdom and certainty that our God is a God who loves us enough to be present with us always. We celebrate that presence in today’s readings, in our shared season of light with the Jewish people through Hanukkah, and in our special tradition of the unfolding of the *O Antiphons*.

God’s Presence Among Us in the Written Word

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah calls on the king Ahaz, “Hear then” (Is 7:13). Because Ahaz does not listen, God gives him a sign, “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” We know from the rest of the story that Ahaz neither hears nor sees; he chooses not to walk in the way of the Lord. In some ways, we can empathize with this king who has to make a difficult decision, and God’s way does not seem to him the best way. The sign God gives is too simple for Ahaz to take seriously. Surely a young woman giving birth to a child cannot be a sign of God’s presence!



A Quiet Moment, Timothy P. Schmalz

Yet we who are followers of Jesus the Christ believe that, centuries after the time of Ahaz, God has given us the same sign – a young woman marries a carpenter, she gives birth to a son far from her home, the little family become refugees oppressed by the rulers of their country, and her son grows up to be executed as a criminal. The Lutheran preacher, David Lose, summarizes it well, “God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people, and that God comes through a birth like all the millions of other births in the world to promise us freedom from sin, fear, and death *and* rebirth as the children of God.”

Psalms 24 deepens that sense of God’s presence beyond us as humankind to the whole of the cosmos, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for the Lord has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers” (Ps 24:1-2). Before God chooses the people of Israel, before the coming of the Son as human among us, God becomes incarnate in the creation of the cosmos and all that dwell in it. God not only creates but becomes incarnate – God is present with the cosmos, with Earth, with all who inhabit the Earth – human and other-than-human. This is Emmanuel, the God who creates and remains present with us!

In his letter to the Romans, Paul focuses on the meaning for humans, for those “who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:6). We are not only created by God; God not only sends the Son to be human like us; but we now belong to Jesus Christ, we are “God’s beloved. . . called to be saints (holy ones)” (Rom 1:7). We belong, not in the sense of being owned by Jesus Christ, but we belong in the sense of being accepted for who you are, of being yourself and of being seen as yourself in all your uniqueness. It is this which makes you a “holy one,” one like every being created in God’s image. The blessing which follows says simply what the fruits of belonging look like, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7).

God's Presence Among Us as Exemplified in the Person of Joseph

In Matthew's Gospel, we meet one man who exemplifies this wonder of what God's presence means in your life, of who God's presence calls you to become, of who God's presence frees you to be. All four Gospels name Jesus as the son of Joseph. Matthew and Luke give more detail about his role in the birth and childhood of Jesus.

Yet we tend to pay little attention to this "righteous" man who knew so deeply in his being that God was with him that he could accept the improbable messages sent to him by an angel in four dreams. In the dream recounted in today's reading, he is told not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because she has conceived by the Spirit (Matt 1:20-21). In the second dream, he is warned to leave Bethlehem and flee to Egypt with his family (Matt 2:13). In the third dream, he is told that it is safe to return home (Matt 2:19-20). And in the fourth dream, he is warned to go to Galilee instead of returning to Judea (Matt 2:22). Can you even imagine the depth of faith that it would take to take seriously and act on such dreams: to trust that your wife-to-be has been faithful to you even though she is now pregnant, to become a refugee family in a foreign country with your young wife and a little newborn child, and to return to a new home in order to escape the wrath of the king?

Ron Rolheiser helps us understand what this really says about Joseph who trusts his God's presence in his life:

Joseph spares Mary embarrassment, he names the child as his, and he provides an accepted physical, social, and religious place for the child to be born and raised. But he does something else that is not so evident: he shows how a person can be a pious believer, deeply faithful to everything within his religious tradition, and yet at the same time be open to a mystery beyond both his human and religious understanding. What does one do when God breaks into one's life in new, previously unimaginable ways? How does one deal with an impossible conception? In essence what Joseph teaches us is how to live in loving fidelity to all that we cling to humanly and religiously, even as we are open to a mystery of God that takes us beyond all the categories of our religious practice and imagination.

There is a beautiful poem about Joseph, *O Sapientia*, written by Madeleine L'Engle, in the voice of Mary:

It was from Joseph first I learned
of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
me from his house; but, unafraid,
he put me not away from him
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.
The Child's first cry came like a bell:
God's Word aloud, God's Word in deed.
The angel spoke: so it befell,
and Joseph with me in my need.
O Child whose father came from heaven,
to you another gift was given,
your earthly father chosen well.

With Joseph I was always warmed
and cherished. Even in the stable
I knew that I would not be harmed.
And, though above the angels swarmed,
man's love it was that made me able
to bear God's love, wild, formidable,
to bear God's will, through me performed.

We delight in knowing that Joseph is patron saint of both Canada and Peru.

God's Presence Among Us as Shown in the Jewish Festival of Hanukkah

This year Hanukkah begins on Sunday evening, December 18, and ends on Monday, December 26. This is a Jewish festival commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem and subsequent rededication of the Second Temple at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. According to tradition, there was only a small amount of oil available to light the Temple menorah. Miraculously, however, oil for just one night lasted for eight nights until more oil could be delivered.

The celebration of Hanukkah involves lighting a nine-branched menorah, with one new candle lit each night. The candle in the center, the shamash, is used to light all the other candles. There are three blessings said over the Hanukkah candles. All three are said on the first day, while only the first and second are said on the other days of Hanukkah. These three blessings will be sung in Hebrew tonight by every faithful Jewish family:



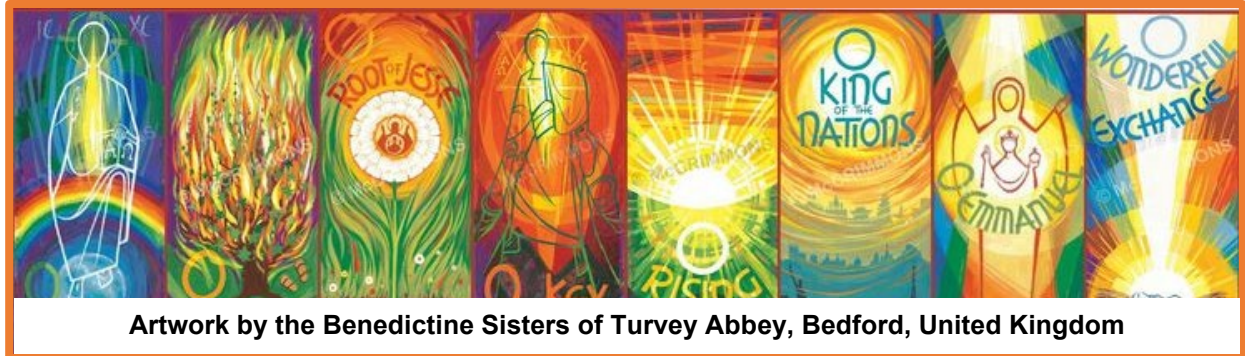
Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Source of Life,
who makes us holy through your commandments,
commanding us to kindle the Hanukkah lights.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of Life,
who performed wondrous deeds for our ancestors
in days of old at this season.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of Life,
who has keeps us alive, sustains us,
and brings us to this moment.

God's Presence Among Us as Shown in the Tradition of the *O Antiphons*

On Saturday December 17, we begin the celebration of the seven *O Antiphons*, each one a title of Christ, applying an attribute mentioned in Scripture. The tradition began as early as the 6th century in Italy and was celebrated in many forms during the Middle Ages. We know it best today through the singing of the hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*:

- 17 December ~ *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom)
- 18 December ~ *O Adonai* (O Lord)
- 19 December ~ *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse)
- 20 December ~ *O Clavis David* (O Key of David)
- 21 December ~ *O Oriens* (O Dayspring)

22 December ~ *O Rex Gentium* (O King of the Nations)
23 December ~ *O Emmanuel* (O God-With-Us)



In one of God's never ending simple little surprises, this year on this Sunday (December 18) both the first day of the Hanukkah celebration and the second *O Antiphon* focus on God as Lord (Adonai – for Jews) and on Jesus as Lord (Adonai – for Christians).

We bring all these themes together in a poem-prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, entitled "Emmanuel":

We like to say Jesus "came down from heaven"
to show us how much God cares.
But Jesus did not "come from away."
God doesn't live in heaven.
Ever since the Exodus God has lived among God's people.
Christ's advent is not so much an arrival as an emergence,
the divine glory hidden in our midst suddenly visible,
our unity in love exposed by one who is one with us,
God's compassion secreted away in our hearts
breaking out into the open.
This is the revelation that comes to us so often late,
after the dusty journey, on our way out of the hospital,
on the other side of the treacherous bridge,
at the victory party and yes, the funeral:
that God was with us all along.
This is not news; yet we are just now opening our eyes.
The Beloved is always drawing near
and we are always, always waking up.

May this be our chant as we journey close to Christmas, "The Beloved is always drawing near
and we are always, always waking up."

Happy Advent!

