

Series: Lessons from the Lectionary
Today: The Promise of Messiah
Text: Isaiah 7:10-16

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, December 19, 2010 (Fourth Sunday in Advent)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

When our children were very young, we lived in Portland, Oregon where I served as Associate Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Near the church was a large outdoor shopping mall called the Lloyd Center where every year they put up a Christmas Tree which was about the size of the one at Rockefeller Center in New York. One year, when our daughter, Holly, was about five years old, we visited Lloyd Center a few weeks before Thanksgiving, and they were in the process of putting up the tree.

Holly was fascinated by the workers who were struggling to get the tree ready for the holiday shopping season, but she could not figure out what they were doing. So she asked me, and I told her they were boring holes in the trunk of the tree and reassembling the branches to be sure the tree had perfect symmetry. Holly stood there and watched for a while, and then she asked, *“Dad, why are they doing that? Did God make a mistake on that tree?”*

“Did God make a mistake on that tree?” I have never forgotten that experience of a five year old child who is now 36 and works as a social worker helping cancer patients to live productive lives when they are faced with debilitating cancers which disfigure and eventually kill. I am proud of her because she refuses to allow physical appearance to define her relationships with those she serves. She did not and she will not buy into a culture which needs everything to be perfect before it is of value.

A few weeks after I heard Holly’s reflection on the Christmas Tree at Lloyd Center, I heard a talk given by Monsignor Robert Fox, a priest in the Archdiocese of New York. Speaking of the meaning of God with us, he said that ours is a culture which selectively edits out that which is, in order to

conform to a reality that is more pleasant to us. He says, *'We refuse to see the painful, the ugly, the less than perfect experiences in life in order that we might have a view of life that is more acceptable to us.'*

This is what makes our scripture lessons so important this morning. Both of lessons speak of a God who identifies with the imperfection of humanity; a God who comes to us in a form we can understand; Immanuel, God with us.

The words were first spoken by the prophet Isaiah about 735 years before the birth of Jesus. It was during the time when the Kingdom of Israel was divided in two: ten northern tribes and two southern tribes. There was conflict between the nations, and the North had made an alliance with Assyria against the South. Ahaz, who was the leader of the Southern kingdom sought to make the same kind of alliance with the totally pagan Assyrian empire, and Isaiah speaks a word of warning. He encourages Ahaz to ask God for a sign, and Ahaz refuses, but God gives a sign anyway: *A young woman will conceive and bear a son, and his name will be called Immanuel.*

Seven centuries later, Matthew uses that prophecy to point to the birth of Jesus as fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah. The angel speaks to Joseph and says that the child conceived in Mary is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. The same name, only this time in Greek (the language of the New Testament) is given: Emmanuel. Both mean *God with us*.

The God of the Bible is not a God who remains distant and unconcerned about the state of the world in which we live. Instead, God takes up residence with us to break down the barrier between God and humankind and calls us to break down the barriers we erect between each other. The prophet reminds us that we are not to make unholy alliances with the values of the culture in which we live, but we are to believe that the God who takes up residence with us changes the values of what is important.

Ahaz believed that military power, safety and security was more important than his faith in God. Joseph was in danger of allowing his ego to get in the way of embracing Mary as his wife. He did not

want to be embarrassed by the fact that he was not the father of the child in her. The message comes to both Ahaz and Joseph: *a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Immanuel (Emanuel) which means God with us*, and if God is with you, then you have nothing to fear.

This is the promise we are waiting to see fulfilled in the celebration of Christmas; the birth of the Messiah, God's chosen one. This is the invaluable asset to the believer. God who was once seen as distant and foreboding has entered into the human experience just as it is; with all of its imperfections. It is Immanuel who provides us with a new vision of what is important in our lives. Through Him we are all adopted into the same human family. Through Him we can look at people who appear, act, or believe different from the way we appear, act, or believe. Through Him we are allowed to view the stranger not as alien, but of the same substance.

Early in my ministry I was privileged to work as the Protestant Chaplain at a large geriatric center in Syracuse, NY where the average age of the residents was 85. It was there I met a woman named Gladys Camenga who taught me the importance of viewing the world through the lens of Immanuel, God with us.

Gladys was totally paralyzed on her left side. Her speech was limited to two words: yes and no, and no one knew if she really understood what she was saying when she used them. I had been asked to see her because she was Protestant, and three days after she had been admitted, her husband had died. I was told at the time by some well meaning nurses that my visit probably wouldn't help much. "*She isn't much more than a vegetable,*" is the words they used.

I sat with Gladys at the hour of her husband's funeral and read through the funeral liturgy with her. When I was about to leave, she reached out her right hand and took my arm. She held it firmly for a long period of time, and I asked her if she would like me to return later in the day. "*Yes!*" she said, enthusiastically.

I returned often to visit Gladys. I'm not exactly sure why. Every visit with her was frustrating for both of us. She wanted so badly to communicate, and I wanted so badly to understand. But a strange thing began to happen. That nurse who told me that Gladys wasn't much more than a vegetable began to work with her, and over the course of year we found ways to communicate with each other. With the help of her family, we came to know and love this "vegetable" as a woman who had raised three children, run for public office, was one of the most active women in her church and was a regionally known artist of considerable talent.

My last week at Loretto was very difficult for me. Gladys was only one of many residents who had allowed this 30 year old man to become their pastor and their friend. It was hard for me to say goodbye. Gladys' family asked me if I would be willing to come to the family home for lunch and to say our final farewell, and they arranged for Gladys to be transported there, as well. When we arrived, I was taken into the parlor where five of her original water colors had been arranged for me to see. Still only being able to speak those two words, she pointed with her right hand to her paintings and said, "*YES!*"

"Do you want me to have one of these?" I asked. Now, more quiet and reflective, she said, "*Yes.*" I picked a water color of a covered bridge, and it still hangs in our home 35 years later as one of my favorite paintings.

When I returned to the geriatric center, I was reminded once again of how difficult it is for us to accept those who are different from us when we are raised in a culture which has a need to edit out that which is unacceptable. A nurse's aide, new to the center, was obviously having difficulty coping with what she saw daily. She saw me speaking to Gladys thanking her for my painting. After we had finished, she called me aside and said, "*Chaplain Riggs, I don't understand why you spend so much time with that woman. She's not much more than a vegetable, you know.*"

The writings of Henri Nouwen have been my companion throughout my ministry, and he has helped me to reflect on the plight of our culture. He says, *“As long as we continue to divide the world into the strong and the weak; the helpers and the helped, the givers and the receivers; the independent and the dependent; real care will not be possible. The handicapped should remind us of our limitations; the blind of our lack of vision, the anxiety ridden of our fears; the poor of our poverty; and the old of our aging. Thus we can be brought in touch with all human suffering and all human growth. This inner solidarity is the basis of human community where real care and real healing can take place.*

This is the impact of Immanuel. This is the promise of the Messiah. God has identified with the human condition. God knows what it means to feel lonely, awkward, rejected, and guilty. God has experienced the rejection of friends who are not faithful. God has broken bread with the murderer, the prostitute, the thief, and those who have wandered from the path he called them to follow.

Immanuel; God is with us. And the message comes again today to you who believe and to you who are far off; to you who feel worthy of a relationship with God and to you who are sure that no one, and surely not God, would accept you because of what you have done or what you have failed to do. It is a personal message of a God who has laid his life on the line to secure the relationship he desires with you, and it is once again yours to accept or reject.

Immanuel—God with us. This is the promise of the Messiah yesterday, today and forever.

Amen.