

## Reflection: Advent 4 – Love

Scripture: Isaiah 7: 10-16, Psalm 80, Romans 1: 1-7, Matthew

### Matthew 1: 18-25

We are so close now, aren't we? The long waiting is nearly over. The Christ child will soon be born again – once more to take up residence in our hearts. We remember – we remember and we welcome him into our hearts and our lives this Christmas season. *For unto us a child is born; unto us a gift is given. And he shall be called Emmanuel....*which means: **God-with-us!**

What a gift! The God of Love is born in the form of a tiny babe ( and who cannot love a tiny baby) – exquisitely vulnerable, so human, so totally dependent on the good care and protection of his human parents – so dependent on **our** love.

Such a risky under-taking for the Christ! What if Mary had said “no”? What if Joseph had walked away from the pregnant Mary? What if the journey to Bethlehem had been too difficult and the birth had gone horribly wrong? What if there had been no shelter at all on that night? What if the wise men had betrayed the whereabouts of Jesus to Herod?

The wonder of the gift is often in how it is received. In other words, there is a **relationship** between the giver of the gift, and the recipient of the gift. In our reading from Isaiah this morning we heard that the Lord God will give King Ahaz a sign (even though Ahaz doesn't want a sign) and the sign will be the birth of a child who the mother will name "Immanuel" (which means?). Isaiah goes on to talk about how the child will grow up and learn how to "refuse the evil and choose the good".

In this case, King Ahaz refused to heed the warning inherent in these words, and suffered the consequences – the desecration of the nation of Israel. The gift of good counsel is worth nothing if the message is not carefully considered and then acted upon.

So now we have our first clue as to the nature of the gift of God in Jesus which is coming to us this week, and our appropriate response to that gift.

In Psalm 80 we read a lament that Israel is destroyed and a plea for its restoration. There is a reference to the "vine out of Egypt" which while it no doubt refers to the return from exile of the Israelites in Egypt, also seems to foretell the coming of the Messiah. The Psalmist invites us to see God's hand in the events of this people. Repeatedly he asks: "let your face shine, that we may be saved."

As receivers of the gift, we must turn our faces toward God, that we might accept the shining forth of God, and be saved.

Have you ever heard of the “Peace Pilgrim”? That’s what she called herself. She walked more than 25,000 miles on a personal pilgrimage for peace. Peace Pilgrim vowed to “remain a wanderer until mankind has learned the way of peace, walking until given shelter and fasting until given food.” She did this for 28 years. She died in 1981 – at the age of 73.

**Peace Pilgrim’s message was simple, and it is this:**

***This is the way of peace: overcome evil with good, and falsehood with truth, and hatred with love.***

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Learn to refuse evil, and to choose good, as the Prophet Isaiah said – in **relation** to the baby boy called “Immanuel” – which means? God-with-us.

Relationships. Paul’s letter to the Romans starts out with a very clear statement of who he is in relation to Jesus Christ: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the

dead...” Paul tells us who he is in relation to God and to Jesus, and who Jesus is in relation to humanity and to God. Relationships are important.

I heard a piece on CBC Radio yesterday morning about a well known photographer named Brian Harris. As a professional photographer, this man has always chosen to do work that is socially meaningful – work that has the potential to be beneficial to people. On that road he says he has been rewarded with deep and meaningful relationships with people in different places and different cultures. He is famous for his work in Tibet, and more recently with farmers here in BC.

Searching for a way to continue to be in meaningful relationship, with work that is socially relevant, Brian Harris discovered an organization called “Farm Folk/City Folk” whose aim is to foster sustainable farming – both rural and in cities and towns. He knows the future looks pretty bleak for local agriculture, but Brian says that he is optimistic because “It’s about this very moment where we live.” It’s about how we choose to live in every moment. Brian has a four-room exhibit at the Vancouver Museum right now – a room of his sensitive, exquisite photographs for each season of the year – photos depicting our relationship with the earth in every season, here in BC.

Which brings me back to the quotation from Isaiah about refusing the evil and choosing the good, moment by moment, day after day. It reminds me of something we talked about last Sunday. Remember the “Highway of Holiness”? How when we do things that are foolish, we just need to get back on the highway, turn our faces once more to God, and keep walking!

And why do we need to do this? Paul talks about his call as an apostle of Jesus Christ, to “bring about **the obedience of faith** among all the Gentiles”. We do it because obedience to the will of God is our response to God. Like Mary said “Yes” to God’s need for her to bear Jesus – like Joseph said “Yes” to God’s angel telling him to marry Mary and be father to Jesus – we are called out of our love for God and for that which is good to say “Yes” to God’s will for us.

We are probably not called to be Peace Pilgrim. We may be amateur photographers at best. We are called to prepare a place in our hearts for the coming of the Christ. We are called to love and care for the neighbour or child or partner or parent that God has given us – and **that** may put super-human demands on us personally. We are called to say “yes” in love to the One who loves us – the One whose beloved child we are.

The gift of God **is** Immanuel – God’s presence with us right here, right now. Our response, if we so choose, is a heartfelt and resounding “YES!”

Gracious and loving God,  
Help us to grow in faithfulness and holiness. Open our hearts  
to welcome Jesus once more this Christmastide. Please shine  
your face upon us and help us to see in ourselves the loveliness  
that you see in each one of us. Amen.