

Mark your calendars, friends: I turn 40 in just a few weeks. That is a lot of Christmases, though many of you have seen many more than I. Year after year, we retell the story of God coming to earth and becoming human. What's happened over those many years is that something has changed. Not the story of course or its telling but us - we've changed. Through the annual repetition much of this story gets committed to memory and, though we return to it again and again, in the wake of "life" and all its ups and downs, the story can lose its power and somehow dim.

You might look at this annual return and retelling of the story as liturgy. Our two congregations worship very liturgically - we do basically the same thing every Sunday. Three things happen as a result of that repetition. First, it becomes ingrained - it gets worked into us, into our very bones - so that we know it intimately, inside and out. But because we know it so well, it's easy for us to check out while doing it - to not attend to the words as much, to just rattle it off (The Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the doxology, etc.). We come to church and often just let the liturgy do us. But every once in a while, every so often, something else happens.

We live our lives and some weeks are worse than others. We get sick, loved ones die, relationships end. Some weeks we are lower than usual - maybe due to the season, to the state of the world, or the bills stacking up on the kitchen table. But we make it to church, carrying all that's churning in our lives. **And suddenly the liturgy speaks:** A word, a phrase, a line from a hymn suddenly stands out. It connects with exactly where you're at in your life. You feel recognized, fully seen and acknowledged - truly known in what you're going through. God has reached out to you in worship and said "I see you. I love you. I'm with you. I'm for you."

This is the reason we worship the way we do. For some of us, this is the reason we come to church - and maybe especially on Christmas Eve. Because whatever liturgical form you do, the story we'll celebrate next Saturday night is the story of God reaching into the world, interrupting the routine of our lives, and in the midst of those lives, saying "I'm with you, I'm for you." But most years, Christmas is left in that liturgical 2nd gear: We do Christmas by rote, remembered but routine. We show up and get it done but we don't let it in.

So we come today to the 4th Sunday of Advent and we see that the lectionary (our schedule of assigned readings) recognizes us. This Sunday we're invited by the scriptures to attend again, to come a little closer and hear those words, that story, once more, but maybe a little differently.

James Allison, catholic Priest and theologian, gives us a great question to shape our reading. He looks at the birth of Jesus - our powerful God born a human baby - and he asks, "What sort of power is it that allows itself to be so vulnerable?" He answers his own question, "... unlike any power we know, this power [of God] is confident enough to be vulnerable."

Did you hear the vulnerability in the story we just heard? Mary, a teenage girl, single (though engaged to be married) is found to be pregnant and her “intended” knows he’s not the father. Forget her encounter with Gabriel for a second. These few ‘facts on the ground’ put Mary in danger. The Law in Deuteronomy 22 tells us that pregnancy out of wedlock warrants stoning the mother to death. The Law makes Mary and her unborn son vulnerable. And Joseph knows it, so he resolves to “dismiss her quietly” rather than expose her to public shame and even death.

God intervenes though and tells Joseph in a dream to marry Mary, to be this child’s father, and to call him Jesus: “for he will save his people from their sins.” I looked up this verse in the First Nations Version of the New Testament and it read a little differently. “You will name him Creator Sets Free, because he will set his people free from their bad hearts and broken ways.”

That clarifies the language of “sin” a little doesn’t it? It also clarifies, not only what God intends to overcome through this baby, but the world to which God entrusts this child. Allison puts it well,

[This power of God] is prepared to trust itself to one of the most notoriously unreliable features of human existence—not only the pain and riskiness of human gestation and childbirth, but also the whole of human skittishness about male honor.

- James Allison CC. Dec 11, 2007

This brings us to Joseph. God entrusts God's coming to Joseph as well. Mary has said yes, but God also needed Joseph's yes. Male honor aside, Mary's pregnancy (by the Holy Spirit or not) means public shame and "disgrace" for him. And in a society where to be honorable or "righteous" was social currency, her pregnancy risked his life as well. Joseph had made up his mind to "dismiss her quietly" but God intervenes: The angel appears and says, "Do not be afraid."

Though we know how the story ends, though we know what this world does with vulnerability - what it eventually does to this vulnerable child - the confidence of this power (as vulnerable as it will be) invites Joseph to FEAR NOT: **God invites Joseph into that confidence and vulnerability.** Again, James Allison says

Vulnerability to mere flesh; vulnerability to the law;
vulnerability to death: these will be the signs of the power of the One coming in, the signs of [God's] confidence in us, in what we can become, and in what he can make of us.

- James Allison CC. Dec 11, 2007

Do you hear that? This invitation is for us too, beloved. Do not be afraid. It's an invitation to be confident in the face of the power of this story - a story so central to who we are as people of Christian faith that we take four weeks to get ready for it and 12 days to celebrate it!! To return to this story again, vulnerable and open to its power and profundity, can be a scary thing - **what could it mean for us to take in what this story tells us?** The truth that God refuses to linger at the sidelines of our lives - out of reach and beyond what we go through - insisting on taking up the experience (the vulnerability) of human life with all the pain, joy, danger, loss and despair that come along with it?

It begs the question though: Are we confident enough in God, in the power of God, to be vulnerable again to this story and what it means? Are we willing to trust God enough to be open to the way this story could change us? **Can we be confident enough to stay present to the story of God's coming presence among us?**

I know what you're thinking: "Confident in God (scoff)? Sure thing, Pastor Ben." But I ask you, what is that confidence in God but Faith itself? Faith is confidence in the face of our own vulnerability - the unpredictability of this life - because of God. Faith that though the world deals harshly, mercilessly with vulnerability, vulnerable is the way God chose to come to us. Can faith hold us steady enough to bare being vulnerable to this coming child, this sign of God's presence with us? Can our faith in God be cracked open enough to take this in?

Another way to talk about vulnerability is to call it presence. To be fully present is to be vulnerable - subject to being affected by that to which you're being present. The Gospel of Matthew takes presence seriously. It's bookended with presence. Emmanuel will be the sign - "God with us" - at its beginning. And the last verse of its last chapter: "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." This is God's presence, the presence of Christ.

Christ is present to us, dear ones - to our lives shaped as they are by "bad hearts and broken ways." With his birth we begin again the journey into his presence - truly, a journey into the "good news" itself (the good news that will set us free). That good news is given to us in that one moment we'll celebrate on Saturday night, but it's big enough news that we need to walk with it and grow into it - and Jesus' presence to us will be our teacher.

My hope for us all is that we'll be present this Christmas Eve, confident in the power of God made flesh, made vulnerable - confident enough to allow it to pierce our spirits and take root in us.

AMEN