

Peace on Earth: Planting Seeds of Love
 Isaiah 7:10-16
 Matthew 1:18-25
 Fourth Sunday of Advent
 December 19, 2010
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Our Advent theme has been "Peace on Earth." Today to conclude our Advent celebration, we look forward to a message in Music, Scripture, and Word.

"Messiah! Glory to God!" Ruth Elaine Schram Men's Choir Anthem

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah Matthew 1:18-25 Scripture

Matthew tells us right away in the first chapter of the first Gospel, that Jesus is the Messiah. Hear the reading, verses 18-25:

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Joseph and Mary Planting Seeds of Love Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer Homily

The birth story in Matthew is definitely from a man's perspective. It's appropriate that the men began the message today in song (or better put, the tenors and basses). They sang, "Glory to God in the highest! Peace to all on earth!" The text had been originally written "Peace to men on earth, but to be more inclusive the choir has changed the wording. We know that this message of "peace on earth" is meant for *all*, not just for the *men*. But

women might notice that this Bible text is mostly about men.

And the man who gets the most attention, is Joseph, the lead character in this passage from the Book of Matthew, the faithful fiancé in this account of the birth story: He was "a righteous man and unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace, [so he] planned to dismiss her quietly" (v. 19). You see in those days, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death for being pregnant before marriage. And so Joseph plans to dismiss her quietly, until the angel calls Joseph into action. He says, "Do not be afraid." This is how the call always comes—with gentle assurance, and then with a challenge. Joseph is to take Mary—child and all—and make her his wife, care for her and care for the child. And he does this. What a good guy. We named our son Joseph, Sepp for short, and I have always liked to think our son is named after this upstanding, kind, and faithful man in the Bible. Joseph doesn't ditch Mary when she tells him she's pregnant, he will not disgrace her, and he follows the instructions of the angel (likely a *male* angel) and names the child Jesus. "*He* named him Jesus," the text says, not "*they* named him Jesus." Matthew shows us Joseph as a faithful servant of God planting seeds of love by giving Jesus *a father*, as well as a mother, by associating him a God-given name, Emmanuel, and by using the title, Messiah, the anointed one, which puts Jesus in the company of prophets, priests, and kings.

Prophets foretold his coming, and then angels brought the cast together on that Holy Night, the important people in the cast being the parents. God is behind all this: God spoke through the prophets, and God sent the angels. God chose loving parents to raise this child, parents who answered God's call to nurture this boy, born to be the Prince of Peace.

Through the centuries, music has told the Christmas story again and again. More than the scriptures, music lingers in our memories. It is familiar and it takes us back to an ancient memory of the angels' song. It lifts us out of darkness and reminds us of the hope of the world that came to Bethlehem in a baby.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem, on Christmas Day in 1863, called "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The poem has been set to several tunes. In 1863, the Civil War was raging. Longfellow's son was serving as a lieutenant in the Union Army and had been wounded. His wife had died two years before. Longfellow was deeply depressed by the great horrors of the war, and yet when he heard the church bells ring on Christmas Day, he remembered the message of the angels: "Peace on earth, goodwill toward all."

"Christmas Bells" Charlotte Ellis Women's Choir Anthem

A Sign: Emmanuel Isaiah 7:10-16 Scripture

Just as Longfellow's words were written in a time of war, so were Isaiah's. Today's reading comes from the section of the Book of Isaiah called First Isaiah, likely written by a Prophet from Jerusalem who lived eight centuries before the coming of Christ. At the time, the king of Judah, King Ahaz, was threatened by two neighboring kings, who then invaded and had executed the people they conquered. Ahaz lost his faith, and he neglected to worship Yahweh, the God of the Israelite people. In this passage, God speaks to Ahaz through the Prophet Isaiah:

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

God's Signs Planting Seeds of Love

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Homily

Isaiah says to the King who has lost faith, "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and you shall name him Immanuel." It's like he's saying, see, life goes on! You don't have to worship other gods and fight wars. See, God has not forsaken you! See, God is with us in the form of new life and new hope!

God plants seeds of love all around us. They are seeds that need cultivating; they don't grow without some attention, some nutrients, and some sunshine. God gives us one another, and when divorce or death strikes, illness or unemployment, depression or any kind of uncertainty, God gives us relationships of love that help us make it through the tough times—new friendships, a new church connection, a new way to serve in the community, a new path to bring meaning into our lives.

Isaiah asks the king, why are you so weary? Weary of both the people around you and even weary of God? Have you lost hope? Look around you!

And so the Prophet reminds us too: Look around you! Shake off your weariness. Open your eyes and see the possibilities of life! See what God is doing! See the seeds of love God has planted; see the seeds of hope; see the seeds of peace.

We are the peacemakers. We are the ones to whom God gives a sign—a child to remind us that God is always with us. We are the peacemakers, and the Prince of Peace can give us the courage to keep the vision of peace alive. We must not grow weary. We must hear the call of the angels. We have heard it before, but today we need to hear it again: "peace on earth, good will to all." We are the ones to bring the peace. We are the ones to create the good will. This is the time for joy. This is the time for love.

"Peace, Peace"

Rich & Sylvia Powell

Choir Anthem