Sermon

Advent IV Yr A

22/12/19

Eltham

**Readings**

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

**Psalm 80:1-7,17-19**

**Romans 1:1-8**

Matthew 1:18-25

+FSHS

Rejoice.

Three more sleeps. Three more sleeps. Three more sleeps… I wonder what you are waiting for in three days’ time? I know I’m looking forward to having a long afternoon nap!! Maybe you’re looking forward to being with family and friends, to doing the gift exchange thing, to having a few days to kick back and watch the cricket, or be at the beach, or wherever. And many of us have been involved in these last weeks in increasingly frenetic expressions of Christmas cheer: caroling in the town square, hearing cheesy versions of carols in the supermarket as you’re shopping for a gathering, attending yet another breakup party to mark the end of the year and the summer holidays, all with cheery Santa hats and tinsel. We’ve been singing about babies and shepherds and angels for weeks. So we hear today’s gospel and shrug our shoulders because it’s a less exciting telling of the birth of Jesus than the one we usually hear from Luke, and it becomes part of the Christmas crazy in which we’re all engaged (for three more days).

The problem with this is that we’re still in Advent, and Matthew’s version of the story has a completely different, and very Advent theme: waiting. Here, it’s not Mary encountering the angel, but Joseph, and it’s not the way in which Jesus was born which is significant to Matthew, but his identity: of the line of the Davidic kings thanks to Joseph, Anointed One/Messiah/Christ, born of the Holy Spirit of God – so Son of God, Emmanuel “God with us”, and his very name means “he saves”: Yeshua or Joshua, with echoes back to Moses’ successor who led the people of Israel across the Jordan to new life in the land of promise. And of course, while all of these titles are designed to evoke reference to Israel’s past and its prophecies, they have an eschatological and cosmic dimension. And critically, the angel appears to Joseph in the time of waiting: Mary is pregnant, and in deference to all that the angel has said about who this child is to be, Joseph waits until Mary has had the baby to make her his wife in all senses. It’s this waiting for “God with us” which makes this story an Advent text, one for the time of waiting, the inbetween time, the time between then now and the not yet.

You see, we engage with the Christmas patterns of the world in the season of Advent at our peril in some ways. Because the time of waiting is really important: it’s an important symbol in this fast-food, 24/7, instant gratification world; it’s important to develop expectation, because constant feasting means we lose gratitude for the feast and the foods involved, and if we are celebrating already we lose the significance of feasting the birth of this special child. The church year celebrates 12 days of Christmas – Epiphany being the last day of Christmas; how often we see Christmas itself over by Boxing Day when the hot cross buns first appear on the shelves. It’s as if the world parties until the baby is born, and then it loses interest in what that Baby was all about. We do well to steer clear of that pattern as best we can, and to actively engage the countercultural pattern of waiting, then doing our darndest to celebrate for 12 days of Christmas until the gold incense and myrrh and the beauty of holiness of Epiphany.

But there’s another reason for engaging in the waiting of Advent, and for resisting the urge to induce Mary a couple of weeks early. The angel in Joseph’s dream announces her child as Emmanuel, God with us. We are waiting for God-with-us, and the space created between the announcement and the advent of God-with-us makes space for sorrow, pain, darkness, the experiences of life which are not all tinsel and Santa Claus, especially at this time. We wait for God-with-us in an Australia hard-baked by a harsh sun and the denial of rain for years. We wait for God-with-us, in a land which is on fire, in which people and animals are dying and whole ecosystems are being devoured by flame. We wait for God-with-us in a world where men who abuse women are presidents of significant nations, and where oppressive regimes spread their arrogance and greed for power across the world. We wait for God-with-us, acutely aware that we wait on stolen land which cries out with the blood of the first nations peoples who tended it for 60000 years. We wait for God-with-us in a world where a person can get a 40 year jail sentence for promoting terrorist propaganda, while a rapist gets off with 6 months good behavior, and a child sex offender gets 3 years for destroying the whole lives of countless children. We wait for God-with-us in a culture where it’s completely unremarkable that in 2018 71 women died at the hands of domestic partners here in Australia, and so far this year it’s 55 – more than 1 a week. We wait for God-with-us in a world where democracy is being stood on its head, where fear is driving the rise of the right, nationalism, the evacuating of truth as a principle in the wake of “fake news”, where wars and rumours of wars abound. And meanwhile the oil, gas and coal mining companies really control the discourses of world power, and the earth our mother is being raped while we and our politicians turn a blind eye. In the face of all this sorrow, pain, darkness, the excesses of what the world thinks of as Christmas look increasingly like anaesthesia used to numb, used to escape for a few minutes or a few hours the agony of waiting, and the longing which lies at the heart of it all: the desire for God-with-us, the one who will save his people (all of them, individually and corporately as a community) from their sin, and who will set all things to right, bringing God’s justice and God’s healing.

This is cause for rejoicing. You might well ask me: how can you now say we ought to rejoice when you’ve just made us all depressed by recounting the seeming hopelessness of our world as it is? That’s because rejoicing is a prophetic act. Rejoicing, the bringing of joy, looks in hope to what will be, and brings it into the present with a freedom that’s contagious and exciting. We rejoice, because we expect God-with-us, Emmanuel. We’re not alone in this mess and darkness, in the sorrow and pain. God has not left us alone to face climate change or fire and flood. God’s with us in this, born in each and every moment of struggle. We rejoice, because we know this coming of God-with-us means both that we have a role to play in seeing God’s realm come in our world in the here and now, as well as the hope that ultimately all is in God’s hand, and God does not let the good creation suffer forever. There will be a coming of God to inaugurate justice, and those arrogant leaders and nations who crave power will find themselves toppled into the dust, while the humble and meek are raised up. There will be a coming of God to bring healing and new life, eternal life. This is why the waiting is so important: because it’s in the waiting we rejoice in hope at what God is doing, and anticipate with joy the coming of God-with-us, Jesus, the one who saves us, our world, our nation, our politicians, our men and women, our first nations peoples, all those who have lived in fear.

There’s a song on the radio at the moment with lyrics that go: “If I didn’t know what was to be dirty, how would I what it feels like to be clean? If I didn’t know what it feels like to be hurting, how would I know what it feels like to be whole?” This time of waiting for God with us is worth embracing as the place where we are most in touch with our need and the need of the world, and are therefore more likely in that experience of need to turn to the One who saves, the one who fills that need with life abundant and overflowing. And when God-with-us finally is with us (in three days – and in many days), we will celebrate with all that we are and have.

Let us rejoice and wait with expectation for the coming of God-with us in these last days of Advent.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**