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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, 2019

Year A

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Has the party started yet?

Recently some people were throwing a party “for grown-ups” as they told their children. It’s a grown-up party, not a kid party, they said. For several days in advance the kids were being warned: you’re going to eat dinner before the guests get here, and then scram; you’ll be seen not heard, and so forth. On the day of the get-together, this was repeated. As the hour drew near, the kids watched as their parents engaged in their frenzied preparations—shoving everything on the floor into an unused closet, pulling out a vacuum, which the kids had never seen used before—and one of the children asked, confused, “Has the party started yet?”

I can’t help but think that, by the 22nd of December, that’s the question that people ask at church. The season of Advent, which is always the four Sundays before Christmas, is a time of penitence and preparation. Advent is the season of what the church has traditionally called “the four last things”: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. For centuries upon centuries, this has been the theme of the Christian life during the Advent season. Typically, the church tries hard to maintain that posture of preparation for meeting the Lord through the entire season of Advent, letting Christmas come when it will, in the fullness of time, and not rushing to it. By the 22nd of December, however, even the most four-last-things-focused person has to ask, “Has the party started yet?”

On this day, it has. For the first time in the season, in our readings, we hear about the birth of Jesus from the gospels, here as recorded by St. Matthew. Joseph is foregrounded. St. Matthew says that Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit,” though he doesn’t say who found that, exactly, or how. But an angel appears to Joseph, tells him to stay with Mary because the child is “from the Holy Spirit.” Joseph is to name the boy “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus means “God saves.” By the act of naming Jesus, Joseph acknowledges him as his son.

St. Matthew tells us that all of this is the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah, that a virgin would conceive a bear a son, to be named “Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” But that was a long time ago that this was promised, this child-to-come who would be the presence of God with his people, probably 700 years ago. And the seven hundred years hadn’t been easy.

It was a long time ago, for one thing. A lot of promises had been made, by God, and for a very long time—centuries upon centuries—they had not (yet) been kept. Seven hundred years is a long time to wait. And even longer: King David and his father had been told that their heirs of their house would reign as kings in perpetuity, forever. But within a couple generations, that had ended ignobly, and that was about a thousand years before Jesus. Even before that, Abraham had been promised that he would have descendants more than the stars of heaven, and that through his family all of the families of the world would be blessed. And still they waited.

It may have been even harder than that. At least God had been talking to Israel through the prophets during those six-hundred-plus years. But, for the four hundred years before the birth of

Jesus, the Lord had not spoken to his people through the prophets at all. After the spirited back-and-forth that we read about throughout the prophetic writings, God was silent through his prophets for 400 years, until the day John the Baptist started preaching in the wilderness. Four hundred years. No party.

Then Mary was found to be with child and the rest, as they say, is history. God-with-us had been promised, and then, one day after 400 years of silence, there he was, in the womb of a virgin named Mary, and there he was, in a manger in Bethlehem.

Cue, at this point, Handel's *Messiah*; cue "for unto us a child is born," let's hear again "every valley shall be exalted, the crooked straight, the rough places plain," when the birth of Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecies; cue the Hallelujah chorus.

The birth of Jesus—the long-promised Christ, Messiah—only matters because Jesus is God himself, he is God-with-us. The world sometimes falls into the trap of thinking that Christmas is an affirmation of children, or babies, or innocence, or gentleness, or family values. But it isn't, primarily. Primarily it is a celebration of the fact that the child who was born to Mary was God incarnate, God-with-us, who came to open the gates of heaven for us, who do not deserve it. The birth of Jesus was his own self-offering, his own gift of love.

It is a self-offering that began with the conception and nativity—with Christmas, the manger, shepherds and wise men—but would only reach its true fulfillment on Easter Day, when death was destroyed by the person born on Christmas. Handel knew that, in the *Messiah*. In the context of the oratorio, Handel's Hallelujah chorus isn't sung in the first section, alongside "for unto us a child is born." The Hallelujah chorus is sung at the end of the second section, after the recounting of the resurrection and ascension. "King of kings, hallelujah, and lord of lords, hallelujah": that's about the resurrection and ascension. Easter is what gives Christmas its meaning, and on the first Christmas Day, Easter was still a ways off. Maybe the party had started—the shepherds and wise men knew that it had—but it wasn't yet in full swing.

There in Bethlehem, Jesus's mother, knew that. A very astute seven-year-old asked me one time why it is that in pictures of Mary and the baby Jesus, Mary so frequently looks sad. In many of the Madonna and child paintings or icons, Mary looks worried. Why is that, she asked, when Christmas is supposed to be such a happy event, such a party?

Mary knew something of what was to come. Simeon had told her, "A sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35). Things would get harder before they would get easier. The shepherds showing up; the strange wise men from far away treating her son like he's the best thing since sliced bread—and they didn't even have sliced bread yet—it was foreboding. In pictures of Mary and baby Jesus, Mary looks sad.

She didn't know the end of the story, or at least hadn't seen it yet, with her own eyes. In time, she would come to see her son—would she have remembered the baby in the manger on that day?—ascending into heaven to sit down at the right hand of God the Father, king of kings and lord of lords.

This is the source of our Christmas joy, not just babies or gentleness. It is because of the birth of Jesus-who-is-God, in light of his resurrection, that we can live lives of celebration. The party has indeed started. As a result, we can forgive people in a spirit of celebration. We come to church and what we do here we call "celebration"; we "celebrate" the Eucharist. We can forgive people; we can not be anxious; we can love without restraint because death has been abolished, and so there is nothing to be afraid of.

Because of Christmas in light of Easter, we can be a different kind of people. When William Penn the younger was setting up the colony in what would become Pennsylvania, he called it a "holy experiment," in which people of different religious practices could live in peace. We can think of our whole lives as holy experiments, experiments in living new kinds of lives, whole lives spent with Christmas joy. Because nothing will ever separate us from the love of God; God will even become a

human being if he has to, in order to let us know that we belong to him, that we came from God, and that we would return to God. The angel said to Joseph, “You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Saving people: that is what Jesus does, and it is for that reason that we celebrate his nativity. The son of Mary, whom Joseph names Jesus—thereby bringing him into the family of King David, Joseph’s family, keeping the promise—brings life to a world of death, brings light to a world of darkness. No matter how bad things may seem, nothing is impossible with God; no matter how silent God may seem, he is always here, and his promises will always be kept.

Isaiah said that a child would be born, named God-with-us, and there he was, in the womb of a virgin named Mary, and there he was, in a manger in Bethlehem, and there he was, on a cross on Calvary, and there he is, on his throne in heaven. The four last things of Advent—death, judgment, heaven and hell—we talk about them in that order on purpose. Death is inevitable for all of us as the human condition; judgment follows, meeting the one who made us; but heaven is our home, because Jesus has made it so, because he has come to save his people; hell only comes if we decide heaven isn’t for us. It may sound odd, but the four last things are part of the party, too. They are indeed part of what we celebrate this week. Death has been destroyed by the resurrection of the one born on Christmas Day; the judgment we deserve has been paid by him; heaven is our destination; hell was invaded and defeated by Jesus, who went there so that we don’t have to.

“Has the party started yet?” It has, fellow Christians. We can celebrate these last few days before Christmas, then celebrate some more, and live our lives as a holy experiment in faith, hope, and love. For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son, one night in Bethlehem, as light to a world in darkness, as life to a world in death, so that everyone who loves the one who loved us first, will not perish, but have eternal life, the party in full swing.