

Advent 4
Isaiah 7:10-17
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Ordinary Lives

On the Monday night after Easter in 1993, St. John's Episcopal Church in Chula Vista burned to the ground. In only a few hours, the sanctuary that had housed the congregation since 1958, and all that was in it, was seemingly gone: the altar, the prayer books and hymnals, the vestments, the communion vessels, the pews, the stained glass windows, even the reserved sacrament, all gone. A sanctuary full of memories and people's hopes and dreams, reduced to smoke and ash.

However, as it often happens, things were not completely as they seemed. Right after the fire, a member of the debris removal crew discovered what looked like to be a body in the midst of all the rubble. But upon closer examination, he discovered that it wasn't a human body at all, but rather the remains of the large crucifix that had hung over the altar. The "body" was the burned and twisted carving of Jesus on the cross.

And then this man, who was not a member of the congregation, did something rather extraordinary. With permission, he took the crucifix home, for he was apparently was an amateur carpenter, and then refurbished it as best he could. He sanded and polished it, removed the pieces that were burned beyond repair, stained it and then brought it back to the church before it held its first outdoor service on the site where the sanctuary once stood.

This man never told them his name. He was just moved to do something for the people of that church because their grief was so profound. He probably wasn't even altogether clear on why he did it, it was just something he could do, so he did.

But that is how God often works: God takes ordinary people and by grace and great love, helps them to do extraordinary things. Things they may not fully understand while they are doing them, but over time help to accomplish God's purposes here on earth. Scripture is full of such stories and among the most striking and moving of them, is the one of Joseph.

Joseph was by all accounts, an ordinary man. Just another carpenter, able to provide for a family but hardly in grand fashion, certainly not a man of any great political or social importance.

He was a decent man. Upon hearing of Mary's pregnancy, he would have been within his rights to have her stoned for adultery but instead chose the gentlest course he could, which was to have her sent away quietly.

But then, according to Matthew's Gospel, when the angel of the Lord told him to take Mary as his wife and raise the child in her womb as his own, Joseph obeyed.

And so it was that God chose this ordinary, decent man to help raise, support, teach, guide and mentor Jesus into adulthood.

It is hard to even imagine what Joseph must have felt at the time, the depth of his conflicting emotions. Confusion mingled with awe, anger with courage, fear with acceptance. But somehow through it all, he was able to follow a course not of his own making or perhaps even desire, but rather one of faith and faithfulness. Something the young Jesus must have seen and absorbed as he was growing up. The man that Jesus would eventually become, probably was in no small part because of Joseph.

And it is perhaps that vision, of Joseph's physical presence to the young Jesus, of being a father, that the meaning of Advent becomes at least a little clearer.

This season of Advent is quickly coming to a close and Christmas, the time of the in-breaking of God among and in us, is very near.

But it is not here yet.

So it is good for us to pause, perhaps for the last time, at least this year, and remember why it matters that God came to be with us in such a physical way and what it is exactly that we are preparing for. For doing so helps us to gain a greater understanding of what it means to truly hear and heed God's call to us.

We live in a time in which we tend to be rewarded for our big gestures, our degrees, our money, our star power, our position, our looks, even our holiness. And yet with God, none of these things in and of themselves matter and in fact may keep us from knowing and following God more fully by becoming ego-driven distractions.

Now big donations to worthy causes are important and absolutely necessary, but just as important and certainly necessary, is the untold amount of time and number of hours that people put in to care for the poor, comfort the hurting, bring a smile to a sick child, speak up against injustice, or just simply listen to a friend who needs to talk. God's purposes are worked out in and through all these things.

And by and large, these things, these acts, are not very glamorous, they won't improve our social standing or get us noticed by the world at large. In fact, they may at times make us objects of curiosity or even derision. But they are the clearest expressions of God's very real and physical presence among us, which makes them truly extraordinary, because they are ways that God chooses to use us.

Which when you think about it, makes perfect sense. Since God chose to become known to us in flesh and blood through the incarnation, what better way is there to make God known to a world sorely in need of good news, than to do the same.

And what that means in our day to day life, is that often the greatest act of faith any of us can ever engage in, is to simply live ordinary, decent lives, not seeking our own glory, but rather listening for and responding to, the sometimes quiet, sometimes confusing, and sometimes even troubling movements of the Spirit, trusting that God will use what we do to help bring about the kingdom here on earth.

And if we prepare our hearts and minds to do just that, we become Advent people, always waiting, always anticipating the revelation we know will come. The revelation we have seen, experienced and been promised by Jesus.

At St. John's, the crucifix that the man refurbished now hangs in the narthex, the porch area you enter from outside before you go into the sanctuary proper of the beautiful, new church that was built and completed in 1997. It is off to one side, and faces a large stained glass window of a giant tree of life, decorated with images designed by the children of the parish day school there for that window in the new building.

Frankly, the crucifix is not all that much to look at: it is rather misshapen and some would even say it is ugly (and in fact, some do). And yet, in knowing the story of how it came to be there, it and the window it faces, serve as links between what was, what is and what can be. The man who worked on the crucifix never asked for recognition, but obviously that didn't matter to him. He just answered a call to do something that he could do. And because he did, his gift to the people of St. John's serves as a testament to God's enduring presence even in the face of loss and destruction.

But in addition to that, what he did is also a great gift to the rest of us as well. For it serves as a reminder that each one of us, through the gifts and abilities we have been given, can not only tell the story of God working in the present moment, but also proclaim hope and anticipation for what is about to become. And that is the promise of Advent, a promise which makes even the most ordinary life, quite extraordinary.

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