

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent

“Behold, the virgin, the young maiden, shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.” This is a Scripture passage we’re all familiar with – we hear it every year during Advent. And you probably know that the name, Emmanuel, in Hebrew, means “God (is) with us”. But, what you may not know is the context of why in our first reading today, Isaiah the prophet tells King Ahaz of Judah to ask for a sign pertaining to this Emmanuel. At this time, the once unified nation of Israel was divided into two separate kingdoms – the southern Kingdom of Judah, where Jerusalem was located and over which Ahaz was king, and the northern Kingdom of Israel, which at this time was allied with Syria in a treaty against Judah. Isaiah, in revealing this prophecy to King Ahaz, is assuring him that if he was obedient to God, in the end everything would turn out successfully for Judah: his wife, the young maiden, would soon be with child, a son that would sit upon his father’s throne to continue ruling his kingdom for the future to come.

But as we know, what is written in the Old Testament is a foreshadowing of the fulfillment that is to take place in the New Testament. And so in our Gospel today, Matthew rightly interprets this prophecy from Isaiah in light of Jesus, the King of Kings, born of the ever-Virgin Mary.

God-with-us...Emmanuel. Isn't it interesting this title God would inspire the prophets and evangelists to give to His Son? And in a most profound way, we can see that by God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ, He truly was with His people as He roamed this earth preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God.

But, we know that Jesus hasn't abandoned us, even after His Ascension into heaven. He continues to speak to us through His divine Word. And He's still with us – indeed in us – as we received His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. And God is still with us as He continually gives us His Holy Spirit to guide each of us on our unique journey to the fullness of His Father's Kingdom. Yes, God is still with us.

But God is with us in lots of less historic and momentous ways too. After all, Jesus was born in a stable and laid in an animal feed box, a manger. Clearly, then, God is also with us in the daily details of life too. He's not afraid to be in the trenches with us when we're going through hard times, when there's fighting in the family, or overwhelming struggles in our lives. God is with us at all of these times too.

But, God isn't just with us in our waking moments either. He's also with us in our unconscious moments too. After all, why would He just want to be with us when we're awake, as if that were the only time we could perceive His nearness or hear His voice?

This was certainly the case for St. Joseph in our Gospel today, as God's voice came to him through an angel during the course of a dream. Could God have revealed His will for Joseph not to abandon Mary in another way? Sure – He's God. But He didn't. Instead, He spoke to Joseph in a dream. And God has spoken to lots of people in the Scriptures through their dreams: Samuel, the prophet Daniel, Joseph (the one with the Technicolor dream coat), the three wise men – and the list goes on and on.

But what are *we* to make of *our* dreams? Certainly God chose St. Joseph and these others and spoke to them in extraordinary ways in their dreams for very significant purposes. But while we shouldn't expect that every dream of ours is a direct revelation from the hand of God, they often are tools that God can and does use – and sometimes more frequently than we would realize. At the same time, they're also tools that our feelings and imaginations can use – which is why our dreams can seem so creatively nonsensical some times. But, they also can be tools that the evil one can use against us, to suggest to us lies or other temptations. And so, as the Scriptures tell us, all thoughts, feelings, and spirits need to be tested to discern whether they are for our good and from God.

In my own personal experience, I have come to see the real value in paying attention to my dreams. Often times our dreams are commentaries on our lives, allowing to come to the fore what many times we keep at bay through busyness and distraction. I keep a notebook by my bed and write my dreams down, and many times bring them to prayer, talking to God about the content. Is there some meaningful symbolism? Are there recurrent themes? Am I not dealing with something that needs to be dealt with?

The point is that if we are truly open to God's Spirit working through our dreams we can better discern His will to help guide our lives by. And doesn't it make sense? One-third, more or less, of our lives is spent in sleep. And I don't believe God considers this "down time" not to be with us! To the contrary, God *is* always with us, and to the degree that we embrace this reality is the degree that we will look for Him working in our daily lives. God bless you.