Dismay, Dismissal, Dreams – God is with Us

Narrative Lectionary

Advent IV – December 23, 2018

Matthew 1:18-25 Russell Mitchell-Walker

During Advent about 10 years ago, our oldest son, Tyler was in his late teens, and he was living in addiction. He had an incident at school, and in talking with the Vice Principal he agreed to go to treatment. However, these things don’t always happen as quickly as they need to, so by the time it was in place for him to go to Saskatoon, he had changed his mind and resisted. It was during the time that parents could get a court order to place their teenager into detox and we used that as leverage to convince him to go. It was a very difficult and challenging situation. I remember at one point, in this intense conversation, after he had destroyed some of the ornaments on the tree, particularly the ones he had made for us, he made his way to the plates that were hanging on the wall, which were given to us by our lawyer for each of the adoptions of Tyler and Cody. He had grabbed a knife and was threatening to destroy the plates. Somehow, in that moment, I was able to take a deep breath, find my ground and very firmly, yet gently say “You don’t want to do that”, and Tyler melted, put down the knife and agreed to go. Now he didn’t end up staying as we received a call the second day he was there, that they were discharging him because he did not want to be there and they could not keep him against his will. We talked to him and told him if he didn’t stay we would get a court order to send him to detox. That is what ended up happening. He was surprised when we met him at the bus and we told him the court order was in place and he would be going to detox. After we got him home, he told us “I guess I’m an outlaw” as he abruptly left the house. He was found by the police and taken to the detox at the Dojack centre, here in Regina. We were blessed to have a member of the congregation working there who supported Tyler and us through that time. We also have never been ones to hide our challenges and struggles with our kids and benefited from the support that being open about these challenges offers. Too often we can feel shame from these kinds of situations in our lives, which can isolate us from getting the support we need and is available to us. Often when we can share what is going on for us, we find that we are not alone. Through that love and support we can experience God’s presence.

Joseph must have felt isolation and shame along with, I imagine, shock, anger and betrayal when he first heard the news that Mary was pregnant, when he knew he had not been with her sexually. Who could he talk to? What would he do? He knew that the law required her and the man who had sex with her to be stoned. We are told he was a righteous man, meaning he knew and followed the law, which also would require him to divorce her. They had been betrothed, which was a year of marriage without sexual relations, following the engagement and before the formal marriage. Joseph also was compassionate as he did not want Mary to suffer, so he planned to dismiss her quietly so she would not be stoned.

I imagine there are people in our community wanting to dismiss the church after the news we shared at the congregational meeting last week, and I understand their feelings. Eastside has been struggling financially and within that struggle, made decisions to use the Mission and Service funds received in trust, to pay the bills. Since 2014 this debt to M&S has grown to close to $30,000 so Presbytery, the regionally body of the church directed us to stop collecting M&S money and encourage members to give M&S directly to the national church. There is likely feelings of shock and dismay, anger and betrayal among us. I know I have been very upset with the fact that the M&S money was not being forwarded and confess my complicity in this situation. I am sorry that I was not more persistent and assertive in my communication that the M&S money is not for us to use. I know we could have done a better job of communicating this action, as well as the church’s financial needs. I apologize for my part in this.

When we are upset or disappointed, our first response might be to dismiss the person or organization we are frustrated with. What does God call us to in situations like this? I believe God calls us to support one another and work toward right relationship. I believe we are called to be a community of grace and forgiveness just as God in Christ is. It can be challenging but it is important. How can we move forward as a church, is the important question. Do we value this community? What we are hearing from the Joint Needs Assessment Committee is that many do find this a vibrant, important and valuable community of faith. If that is the case what can we do to support this community and help us to move forward? Of course one thing that some of us can do and are doing is give more financially. Some of us may feel that is the last thing we want to do! On Sunday at the meeting, Barry Sudom, spoke and reminded us that when something like this is bigger than us, we need to pray, and led us in prayer. I thank Barry for the leadership. In that vein, I am considering starting daily prayer service in the New Year each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings at 8:15am. I’d be interested in knowing if any would join me in praying daily, including for our church.

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because she has conceived by the Holy Spirit. She has not been unfaithful. He is to take the child as is own, naming him Jesus and being told he will be called Emmanuel which means God is with us as was prophesied in Isaiah. This prophecy is a reference to Isaiah 7, and commentaries indicate that it is not necessarily a fulfillment of the prophecy, as there was a child born previously in the time that Isaiah 7 was written that the text is referring to. It is a reminder of the prophecy of a child that will come who reminds us that God is with us. Matthew writes the gospel in the time just after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. The community would have been bereft with this tragedy and needed a reminder that God is with us. Matthew is writing to tell the community the Jesus is that reminder that they are not alone, God is with them. God is with us as well. God’s grace and hope is with us. The church is not perfect, God knows that and is with us when we make mistakes and supports us to move forward as we seek to be faithful, regaining our ground and rebuilding trust. It will be a struggle but we can do it together, knowing God is with us.

Joseph experienced God in a dream which changed everything. He took Jesus as his own, and by naming him brought him into the house of David. He has an important part to play in Jesus’ life, and is needed to be there with Mary and to guide Jesus as a father. This was a powerful dream for Joseph and shifted things dramatically for him. What are your dreams for yourself, for the church, for Eastside? We have some work to do as we discern our future. Can we allow our dreams to shift things dramatically? Can we allow the space and grace for God to speak into the moments when we are most receptive to God’s leading without the temptation to limit those dreams only to what we see as possible, feasible or affordable? We are at a turning point and how we move through this time, will define what we will be, if we will be, in the future. The same goes for the wider church. How we move through this time, will define what Christianity looks like for the next few hundred years. In the nativity stories, the gospel writers wanted to highlight the truth that God was doing something new and different. God continues to move in the world doing new and different things. God always seems to be able to break out of the boxes in which we attempt to keep God. A new day is being born. It is a day in which God will move in new and different ways. Are we able to move break out of the boxes we have put God and church in? Can we keep our eyes open and be ready to be surprised as we journey on this adventure of life and faith? Are we open to learning more about this time we find ourselves in the church and culture? I invite us to embark on a book study which explores these issues and realities for the church, how we got to a place where many churches are struggling as attendance and interest declines and how we move forward. In the New Year, I’d like to offer a study of Practices for Refounding God’s People: The Missional Challenge of the West. It will provide us with the opportunity to understand the shifts that have been taking place in the church and offer practices for reshaping, refounding, and revitalizing our church. One of those practices is the Daily Office, which is daily prayer, that I am open to leading in the New Year.

Two weeks ago, Tylerwas anxious to see us both as he had something he wanted to share with us. It was Thursday of Community Dinner and I was not going to be home until around 9pm. He was too excited to wait that long so he shared the gift with Brian who promised to video me as I opened it later that night. Brian handed me a little box that had a slot with a paper sticking out of it that said, ‘pull me’. I pulled and a hundred dollar bill was attached, I kept pulling and more $100 bills came out, I kept pulling and puling and pulling. I pulled for quite a while before it was empty. Tyler had received settlement money from his First Nation on Christian Island, ON, from where he has his status. Thanks to his fiancé Jessica’s help he was able to apply for this and receive it. He used it toward paying his debts. The gift to us was about half of what he owed us from when he hit bottom and declared bankruptcy, and we had to assume the debt of a loan we co-signed when he went to SIAST a year or so before. He also paid off his bankruptcy debt. It was quite wonderful and responsible, a very proud moment and a reminder that there is hope. He is very aware that he would not be where he is now, without Jessica. Regardless of what the present moment brings, there is hope and we can get through it when we realize that we are not alone, God is with us, both spiritually and through the love and support we receive from friends, family, and community. We all struggle with tough situations and yearn for assurance from one who knows from experience that God’s unbelievable good news is true! We could not have gotten through the tough times with Tyler, if we kept to ourselves in isolation and did not share our challenges with our friends and communities of support. If we all prayerfully ponder the example of Joseph this Advent, surely God will work in us as God worked in him. Thanks be to God.