

**Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A**  
**(Dec. 23, 2007)**

***O Come, O Come, Emmanuel***

Many, many years ago, perhaps thousands of years ago, an obscure middle-eastern tribe suddenly realized that God was speaking to them – and what they heard God saying was this: “I will be your God. You will be my people – and I will never leave you, no matter what; even if you should leave me, I will still be with you.”

People heard this long before recorded history began. It was heard by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was heard by Moses on Mt. Sinai, and by the people in the desert as they fled Pharaoh’s forces.

The prophets hear this and their chief responsibility was to remind the people of this covenant and the part they had to play: the people’s response was to be faithful to God in return and to show this fidelity by being faithful to one another.

In the eighth century before Jesus was born, the Kingdom of Judah was sundered, split in two. The Southern Kingdom, under King Ahaz, felt threatened by the Northern Kingdom and by the Assyrian forces from the East.

King Ahaz called in the prophet Isaiah and asked, “What shall I do?” The prophet gave a simple and unexpected response. “Ask God for a sign.” The king said, “I couldn’t possibly do that.” And the prophet said, “God will give you a sign anyway. This will be the sign: a young woman will have a child whose name will be Emmanuel which means God is with us.”

Now we fast forward 700 and some years. The scene shifts from the trappings and splendor of the royal palace in Jerusalem to the simple home of the village carpenter in a provincial town of Galilee. The carpenter’s name is Joseph, and he is having a restless night because his soul is anguished. His engaged fiancée, Mary, is going to have a child, and he knows he is not the father. What to do? He is a just man – just in two different senses – he cannot approve of adultery which seems to be the situation, and which of course is forbidden. But he is also just in the Biblical sense. He is just in the way that God is just. He wants to do the

right thing and, at the same time, do nothing to hurt this woman he loves.

So he decides to divorce her quietly and hope she can have her child in secret without suffering the sanctions of the law.

Finally sleep comes, and with sleep, a dream.

“Joseph” an angel says, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Her child is from the Holy Spirit. Call him Jesus because he will save his people.” And Matthew, who is recounting this wondrous event, interprets for us: All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son and they shall call him Emmanuel, a name which means God is with us.

In their times of trouble, God did not tell Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, I am going to take your troubles away. God simply said: I am with you. God did not tell King Ahaz he would conquer his enemies – in fact the king did not conquer his enemies. God simply said: I am with you. God did not tell Joseph there would be no problems because of this child – indeed there were many problems. God simply said: I am with you.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent God is still saying to us what God has been saying for thousands of years, but perhaps now with a slight twist:

Ever since I became one of you, God says, I know what it is to be in pain. I am with you in your sufferings, I am with you in your tears, in your sickness, and in your dying. But I am also with you in your joys and in your happiness. I am in the warmth of a friendly embrace. I am in the brightness of a child’s smiling face.

Through the Advent season we sing, “O come, O come, Emmanuel.” At Christmas time, we sing, “O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.”

Dear friends, our Lord Emmanuel has come to us, will come to us today and every day of our lives. Our task today and every day of our lives, is to welcome him with generous and open hearts, perhaps even with open arms as we reach out to one another, to those in need, to those who come to us for help. He is with them, too, our Lord Emmanuel.

And on this December day, 2007, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus we hear the words of the angels to Joseph, to Mary, to Zechariah, to the shepherds and to countless others, “Do not be afraid.” In spite of wars and terrorists, hatred and violence, in spite of storms and floods, cold

and hunger, “Do not be afraid,” for I am with you. I will always be with you, no matter what.