

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Ian Markham

Dean and President of the Virginia Theological Seminary  
The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Sunday, December 22, 2019

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Johnny is desperate for an X-Box. He decides to try praying. So he bows down beside his bed and says, "I promise to be really good for a whole week, if you give me an X-box." He then decides that is too long. So he says, "I promise to be really good for three whole days, if you give me an X-box." Just at that moment, his mother's voice can be heard yelling up the stairs, "Johnny you left your toys out again. You are a naughty boy." He sighs. He looks around his room. He spots a statue of our Lady. Getting up, he gets a towel, wraps the statue in the towel, and places the statue into his drawer. Then he returns to his knees: "If you want to see your mother again...."

We are definitely getting near Christmas. Our reading captures the mystery of the moment very powerfully. Given the conventions of the time, you are probably in the presence of two teenagers - Mary probably 12, Joseph perhaps 14. As we marvel at the miracle of the incarnation, we do find ourselves pausing when we think about the logistics. This is complex. The news that the Incarnation of God will be in Mary's womb is not just difficult for Mary, but for Joseph. One can understand why.

One joy of being an Episcopalian is that it is permitted to "wonder" perhaps even "be skeptical" about the veracity of the Virgin Birth. Your preacher this morning takes a high view of the providential nature of the witness of the Church and the careful selection of doctrines that are part of the creed. The creed affirms the truth of the Virgin Birth; so as an act of trust, I affirm the truth of the Virgin Birth. However, we can and should recognize that Matthew's narrative is appropriately sanitized. For Matthew, the key insight is that Scripture is fulfilled and that the angel of the Lord reassured Joseph. I suspect that the historical reality was much more complex: the nine months must have been filled with deep anxiety, fear, confusion, and shock.

The logistics of discipleship are often very hard. The mystery of divine agency is often really difficult to fathom. We find ourselves responsible for loved ones who are in a hard place; we find ourselves taking on roles at work that we would rather avoid; we find ourselves handling loss of loved ones; we find ourselves misunderstood by others; in short, we often find ourselves anxious, fearful, and afraid.

There are many reasons why some of us are apprehensive about Christmas. The celebration of family at the heart of Christmas is harder when adult children decide to spend Christmas somewhere else, or when a couple is coping with divorce, or when you are facing a Christmas after your loved one has been taken. We can and should take note that “coping” with Christmas is sometimes the experience that we will have. As the great theologian, Elvis Presley put it, “I will have a Blue Christmas without you.”

The invitation of this season is to admire the Holy Couple. As they coped with the trauma of the moment, as they trusted, so we can cope and so we should trust. We should admire these teenagers. God intersects with humanity; and they are the chosen ones. They take it all; they come out the other side. They get through.

Our Roman Catholic friends have this aspect of their theology right. They get that the Virgin Mary is amazing. She carried the very life of God inside her. The creator of the universe was dependent on a teenager. We should pause and marvel at every creche. We should marvel at the Holy Couple.

Now as Episcopalians, we are a people of the book. We share a prayer book. And so much of our theology is found in the prayer book. Now hidden away in the prayer book, on page 504, in the additional prayers for a funeral, there we find the following: “and we pray that, encouraged by their (i.e. the Saints) examples, aided by their prayers, and strengthened by their fellowship, we also may be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light”. So there you go, we are aided by the prayers of those who go before. As a matter of logic, it makes perfect sense to me that if it is appropriate for us to ask the living to pray for us (which I do all the time), I don’t see any reason why we shouldn’t ask those who are alive in Christ to pray for us. And given the extraordinary work that Mary the mother of Jesus did for us – sure let us ask her to pray for us. So please allow me to do the following, let me conclude with the famous “Hail Mary”.

Hail Mary,  
Full of Grace,  
The Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit  
of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary,  
Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners now,  
and at the hour of our death.  
Amen.