

Homily – Advent 4
Sister Greta Ronningen
December 18th, 2022 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

Good morning. I am Sister Greta, and it is a joy and an honor to worship with you on this forth Sunday of Advent.

Today we are looking at the birth story through the lens of the gospel of Matthew. It is important to Matthew to make the link between the prophesies of the Old Testament or Jewish scriptures with the Jesus story. He begins his gospel with an extensive list detailing the paternal lineage connecting Jesus to David to establish for the Jewish community– that Jesus was legitimately fulfilling the scriptures as the Messiah. Of course, this lineage list ends with Joseph not Mary and Joseph is not biologically related to Jesus – but by adopting him he situates Jesus in Josephs lineage – therefore David’s.

In today’s passage we hear how an angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph in a dream and assured him that the child Mary had conceived was by the Holy Spirit and that he should take her as his wife and name the child Jesus. Matthew then connects this dream directly to the passage from Isaiah only in Isaiah he will be named Emanuel – God with us. So, you can see how important it is to Matthew to establish Jesus as fulfilling the Jewish prophecies.

Matthew’s focus is the actions of Joseph not Mary’s. And it is good to know how Joseph dealt with such a difficult situation and how obedient he also was to God. Luke is the gospel writer who we will hear next week as the focus moves to Mary. By the way - did you know that there are more verses on Mary in the Quran than in the entire New Testament?

I am a member of Community of Divine Love, and we are an Episcopal monastery. We relocated to this area a year ago. All of the members of our community are active in prison ministry. For 14 years I led church services in the LA County jails with both men and women. Each week our ministry team conducted about 10 Episcopal services in 3 facilities with about 150 inmates attending every Sunday. One day a man came up to me after services and asked me if Catholics were Christian because he heard that they worship Mary. I told him that yes – they are Christians and that originally there only was Catholicism. And that they don’t worship Mary, but they do honor and adore her and why not as she is the mother of God!

Our Eastern Orthodox Christian siblings use a Greek word for Mary Mother of God - which is Theotokos. Theotokos means God Bearer. Mary was the original God Bearer as she carried this holy child in her womb. But honestly aren’t we all God

Bearers? Don't we Episcopalians believe that Christ dwells within all of us? Yes – we do as every time we reconfirm our baptismal covenant we vow to seek and serve Christ in all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Christ in all people – there it is.

So, we are all Theotokos – God Bearers. It is easier to seek and find Christ in some people more than others – granted – but it is what we commit to – to seek and serve this indwelling divinity in all people. Which means even the difficult ones.

This is a mystical concept the intermingling of divinity with our souls. Do we live in this truth?

Many things can get in the way of our awareness of the indwelling of the divine. It is all too easy to become caught up in our heads – totally self-oriented to the point that there is really no room left for the awareness of the Presence. This is why contemplative practices are so important. We need to let go of our stuff – to quiet the inner chatter so we can sense and connect with the divine within. This is what a monastery is all about. We gather in the chapel multiple times a day so that we can move from self-orientated to God-orientated. There are so many wonderful Christian spiritual practices that reduce the barriers to our living united to this divine presence – which is really divine love.

Where I am most vividly aware of the Divine Presence is when I am facilitating healing circles inside prisons. This is where I have experienced some of the strongest faith I have ever witnessed. These men and women long with all their hearts to heal and transform their lives. They bravely and vulnerably share their stories – most of them heartbreaking and filled with trauma. They reflect on how they have caused harm and take responsibility for the impact they have had on others. I sit in awe of their courage and resilience. And I often think, I see and feel Christ here. And indeed, this is where he said we would find him.

We are living in an intense time in the history of our planet. It is messy and often feels overwhelming. Now it is more important than ever for us to live the truth of our faith. It is time for us to reveal the nature of God by living love into the world. We must be the God Bearers – honoring – even becoming the incarnation by living love. We must live lives that make apparent Divine Love and that honors this indwelling Presence. We need to dream big now. The world needs more and more of us to manifest the reign of God through our lives of light and love. Let us reveal the birth of Christ by living love in our own lives. Let us dream a big audacious dream of the reign of God coming upon earth together. And maybe we can contribute to the better world our hearts know is possible.