

December 18, 2016

In the Dark
Matthew 1:18-25

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For many years now I have walked my dog Sophie in Fish Creek Park.
Recently I was aware of movement out of the corner of my eye.
As I have learned to do, I stopped and watched, even though it seemed there was nothing amiss
In time, I could see some rustling of grass not too far away,
Then a flicker of a tail above the grass, a muzzle briefly sniffing the air,
I counted five coyotes creeping through the grass...heading our way.
then all movement again stopped.
Knowing this, I had to make a choice whether to act in response, or continue the walk we planned.
Sophie and I turned around and headed for safety.
It got me to thinking, first about when I first arrived here, and walked in the park,
Without seeing any coyotes...how many times had I missed the signs of their presence?
Over the years, with experience and practice I have become more able recognize we are not alone
it is rare to go for a walk and not see them even in broad day light...
Like being oblivious to the coyotes, I think I am (we are) often oblivious to God's presence
We say we believe, but we bustle through our busy lives without paying attention to what God is doing,
(unless we need something we don't pay attention, rather we trust in ourselves when we think we can)
I began to see parallels between my experience of learning to look for coyotes, and my journey of faith,
There is a need to be intentional about watching for signs of God's presence and God's activity,
Making space for God and growing awareness of what God is doing are tasks of Advent.
This week we focus on God's love for us, Emmanuel (God with us)
Through remembering--stories of how God acted in the past,
how people understood God's presence throughout history
and learning of how God's promises to act
We can be ready to recognize signs of God's presence,
And be intentional about following when we hear and recognize "God with us"
If we are not alert or ready to see the surprising ways God's presence is revealed
We can miss out on opportunities to know God's light in our darkness, or share that light.
Our scripture is a story of God's Spirit moving in surprising and unexpected ways,
It centers on God's presence revealed through the journey of faith of two ordinary people.
Who were used by God to bring God's son into the world
The gospel writer Matthew says "The birth of Jesus took place this way"
A young girl still waiting for her wedding night had an encounter with an angel,
With the result she "Found herself with child, by the Holy Spirit." Matthew says
Those few simple words do not do justice to the life changing effects they had on Mary
Life could never be the same for her
The life of faith for her, following and obeying God was not a head exercise,
From the outside it looked like this was not a "holy" story
But one that was tinged with shame and a sense of wrong doing.
For Mary it was a challenge.....She was having a baby, and she was not married.
She must have wondered how anyone would believe that the Holy Spirit had placed the child in her.
How would she explain this to Joseph and her family, and how would they respond.
The real risk that as a betrothed woman she could be stoned for adultery,
Or cast out to raise a fatherless child.
As she took the steps, encountered the reactions of those closest to her
She and others must have wondered how God could be part of such an outrageous plan.
Yet Matthew tells us that this is precisely the way that

God chose to come into the world, through the struggles and everyday living a poor girl,
in an out of the way place, in an occupied territory.
God was not just with Mary in a spiritual sense, but God was coming into the world through Mary,
Although at times it must have seemed to Mary that God was abandoning her,
Even as God continued to work behind the scenes, to prepare the way for Christ.
In Mary's darkness God's light was already shining albeit for a time hidden and unseen.
Can you imagine what would have happened if Mary had not trusted and obeyed God?
Although this story is really about God acting in the world,
Matthew also focuses on the actions of Joseph
Matthew stresses that Joseph was a man who was kind, and who tried to obey God in his life.
When he found the girl to whom he was betrothed was pregnant and not by him,
He was understandably upset.
As a betrothed woman, to conceive a child by another man was considered to be adultery
As a righteous man, Joseph knew that God's law was clear in such cases, the punishment was stoning
It must have been a difficult for him to feel betrayed by Mary, confused by her explanation
Conflicted by his desire to do the right thing in the eyes of God...while every choice looked wrong.
he obviously was compassionate, for although he suspected the worst,
Although charging her with adultery would be easiest for him and adhere to the letter of the law,
He decided on a compromise....to "put her away quietly"
Which would free Mary to marry the father of the child or cover up the pregnancy in another way.
Based on everything Joseph had been taught, he believed this was what God would want him to do.
But God was active in ways Joseph had never contemplated before.
In his darkness and in the dark of night, God intruded on his dreams.
Disturbing Joseph's carefully laid plans, disturbing Joseph's assumptions of what was holy
God called Joseph to choose to follow a difficult path
Joseph recognized God's voice and trusted God's voice above the voices around him
He made the choice to obey God to trust in what seemed impossible, that the child was of God.
It would be a sacrificial act, and act of love, love of God and for God's way above all others.
And in his obedience, Joseph's life and the world would never be the same.
Joseph obeyed God, marrying Mary, and naming his child Jesus as God had directed.
The birth of Jesus happened in this way,
Through two people who were open to God, trusted God and obeyed,
God used the words and actions of two seemingly ordinary people to bring light into darkness.
The truth is that this story is permeated with God's mystery and God's presence
But the truth is that the world is still permeated with God's mystery and presence.
God is on the move in the world, and God continues to come to us
Just as God came into the world in the flesh, in a baby whose father obeyed God and named him Jesus
God continues to breathe purpose into the world and into ordinary people, like you and me
Changing the way we understand ourselves and our place in the world,
Calling us to be alert to what God is doing, to recognize God's voice
And respond in word and action to the light God gives.
And to bring the light of God's presence to the darkness in the world
The truth that we may never know how God has used our words or actions.
But that God continues to use words and actions of people...of you, me or those around us
Just as God did long ago.

A few years ago, having a difficult day,
I headed on snowy sidewalks toward a coffee shop
On the way I passed a street person, holding out an empty coffee cup, looking for some change
As I walked by, I nodded and said hello, keeping my hands in my pockets.
The man looked me in the eye, smiled and said "God Bless You"
As I continued toward the coffee shop I was strangely affected by the blessing.
Perhaps one would have expected God's blessing to come from inside the church
But at the time I could not remember the last time someone had spoken those words to me
Amid the difficult time in my life, those words reminded me that God was with me.
WE never know who God will use, so be alert
As usual, this past week, I visited people in hospitals and hospices,
Hoping that my presence is a reminder that God is with each person I visit,
But I received an email from a relative this week,
To let me know of the peace and comforting reminder that God was with them
That came about because of my words and prayer.
We never know how God might use our words, to reveal God's presence to encourage the weary.
Today, with the mitten tree, all of us have participated in showing God's love
In tangible ways in the world, and show the light of God's presence.
We have been led by our children, acted in faith,
We never know how God might use our actions, to reveal God's presence.
So let's make space in our lives for God's light
And ready to share the light and love God gives,
God is on the move, continuing to bring light into darkness in the world,
God is with us.
Amen