

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

“He lives in you”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

When you introduce yourself to someone for the first time, what do you usually tell them about yourself? You probably say a little more than simply your name. Do you use a business card with your name and official job title, or do you say something about your education, a family connection, or even your religious faith that might help others get to know you? I ask because in today’s epistle reading, Paul was introducing himself to the church in Rome. Paul was writing because he hoped to travel to Rome on the way to Spain as a missionary. Paul was anxious to introduce himself to the church in Rome, and so Paul began with his name and also described his faith as a follower of Jesus.

Paul’s letter to the Romans begins with these words, “*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.*” Notice that the first thing Paul says after his name is that he is a “*servant of Jesus Christ.*” Only then, does Paul say that he has also been called to be an “*apostle*” of the gospel. Paul does not go into his background as a Pharisee or his citizenship as a Roman citizen. Paul first chose to call himself, first and foremost, “*a servant of Jesus Christ.*” His role as an apostle was not meant to impress people for show; rather, Paul said he was an apostle to explain his purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul’s self-introduction is humble and to the point. He makes it clear he is a servant and a messenger of the long-promised Christ.

Paul’s self-introduction is helpful for us because it is the standard by which all Christians must measure themselves. If we say we follow Jesus, then we also must become servants and apostles, proclaiming the good news with our lives. Paul didn’t claim membership in a church or a denomination, but rather called himself a servant of Christ. Like Paul, we too, have received grace and apostleship to share the good news. We are servants in a servant church following Jesus.

Matthew’s gospel today, describes the annunciation, or announcement, of Jesus’ birth to Joseph in a dream. The angel addressed him as “*Joseph, son of David,*” thereby introducing Joseph to us. No doubt, Joseph was aware of his family lineage stretching back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and Solomon, and the prophets. Indeed, Matthew’s gospel begins by recounting the 42 generations leading up to Jesus through Joseph. Joseph was of such noble birth that he is described as “*a*

*righteous man,*” and though he had found that Mary was pregnant, and not by him, he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace and planned to quietly break their engagement. Joseph’s true character can be seen in this decision. Joseph was compassionate toward Mary, and sensed that the right thing to do was to be merciful to her, rather than to demand her exposure and, yes, even her possible death according to the law laid out in Deuteronomy (22:20-21).

Joseph had resolved to, as we say, “do the right thing” by allowing Mary and the baby to live, but always with a sense of uncertainty. The baby’s lineage would never be properly introduced or explained, but doing the right thing meant that Mary and the baby would at least be allowed to live.

And so, Joseph went to bed, having decided to do the right thing. The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*” We might say that the angel encouraged Joseph to do not “the right thing,” but “the righteous thing.” When he awoke, Joseph did not do the socially accepted “right thing,” rather, he did the righteous thing of God. Joseph had found himself at a crossroad, met by God; it was a moment that demanded his choice. Joseph’s choice defines his identity as a righteous man. His choice to take Mary as his wife would also define Mary’s identity as the Mother of Our Lord, and allow Jesus to grow into his identity as Emmanuel, God with us – the one who saves humanity from their sins.

As we continue our Advent journey toward Christ’s nativity, we must stand in awe of Joseph’s decision to live as a righteous person, choosing to do the righteous thing that would give life and hope to his family and to the entire human family. Like Mary in Luke’s gospel who said, “*I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be unto me according to your word,*” Joseph, rather than living for his own personal desires or social conventions, decided to become a servant of God. Joseph and Mary allow us to see that in each of our lives, we also will be called upon to make decisions that will have far reaching impact upon the lives of others for good. Your life, because of decisions made with God’s guidance, can give life and hope to others.

Paul too, was a bit like Joseph and Mary. He was encountered at a crossroad moment in his life by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He was grasped by the righteousness of Christ that turned him from selfishness and a desire to do what was socially correct as a Pharisee, leaving it behind to become a servant of Christ.

As we prepare to celebrate Christ’s nativity, today’s readings help us prepare not simply for a cultural celebration in which we eat the right foods, display the right decorations and have all the

right kinds of gatherings and presents. We also remind ourselves that like Joseph, Mary, Paul and countless generations after them up to our own generation. God comes to ordinary people like you and me, in order to make us righteous people, who call themselves servants of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is named twice in today's gospel. He is given the name "Jesus," meaning, "*he will save his people from their sins.*" He is also called, "*Emmanuel,*" meaning "*God with us.*" Jesus is of the lineage of David, but his name now points to a new kingdom of salvation and forgiveness of sins, freeing all who call upon him to become righteous people – servants of Christ.

The name Emmanuel says it all – God is with us. This is who we prepare to celebrate at Christmas. God is with you because Christ lives in you. Jesus was born of Mary to save his people from their sins. He lives so that you might live.

As you prepare to celebrate Christmas, you might ask yourself, "Who am I, now that Christ dwells in me? How would I introduce myself to others for Christ?"

The one who is born of Mary is called Emmanuel, "God with us," and he lives in you. He makes you righteous each day, so that you might, like Joseph and Mary, choose to serve with him.

He lives in you so that your life might give life and hope to others. Amen.