4th Sunday of Advent – Cycle A – December 18, 2016

“Emmanuel, A Dream Come True”

Isaiah 7:10-14
Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-24

“The children were nestled all snug in their bed,
While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads.”

Sugar plums aside, the joys of Christmas are fully alive in the dreams of children and even in most adults at this time of year, especially within this last week before Christmas. This time around Christmas seems to be the most appropriate time of the year for dreams, both in the sense of visions of awesome, fanciful and wonderful things and also in the sense of hopes and desires coming to fulfillment. We even hear it in the songs of the season, “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my DREAMS” and “I’m DREAMING of a white Christmas”. I hope that dream comes true!

Dreams are a window to our souls but they are also where our deepest anxieties and insecurities play-out and manifest themselves to us; it is where reality and sur-reality or imagination interact and intertwine while we physically shut down for sleep. Our dreams often inspire us but they can confuse us at the same time and sometimes in the same night which makes them hard to trust or fully understand. It is within this context that our Gospel takes place in which Joseph is called to act on a dream. Is this dream real or a figment of his imagination as a result of the stress of the situation with his betrothed and/or the fantastic story from Mary as to how this all transpired? St. Thomas Aquinas suggests in a commentary on this passage that this message was given to Joseph in a dream while sleeping, “Because Joseph was in a certain way doubting; hence he was in a certain way sleeping, so to speak, and therefore rightly is the angel said to have appeared to him in his sleep.” All of us here today can see with the benefit of faith and Tradition on our side that this dream was real and prophetic and providential and a key part of our salvation history. Beyond his doubt however, I’m sure it was also a moment of fear and great confusion for Joseph, at least initially. I know another guy named Joseph who experienced something similar. Although not as profound as being called to be the earthy father of God, it was no less real, scary and confusing.
Nearly 15 years ago I was secretly struggling with thoughts that I was being called to be a deacon, an idea that was scary and seemed ridiculous. Finally, after several months of denial and discernment I mustered the courage to finally tell my wife Tara about these recurring thoughts and feelings that I kept to myself while they kept coming to me. I was waiting for her to tell me I was crazy or that maybe I was creating these thoughts on my own. Instead, she said, without hesitation and without shock, “That’s not crazy at all. I actually had a dream about that.” We had never had any discussion about this before and yet it was as though we were on the same page. My jaw hit the floor and I was freaked out for a second until I realized that God had worked through her while working with me to listen to what He was calling me to do. This isn’t WHY I decided to inquire about and eventually pursue the diaconate but it certainly was the nudge that I needed to wake me up from my own doubt and uncertainty. My point is that God is here, in OUR midst working in and through each of us in order to show us that He is not distant from us or a figment of our imagination but is real and an intimate part of our being and of being itself. Joseph woke up and was able to discern, through faith that God was truly with him and in his midst and that he had been given a great gift. The same is true for us!

This is the essence of Christmas: God coming into our lives! This is what we have been preparing for the last several weeks. Advent is a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ or “Emmanuel!” as the readings say. Emmanuel means, “God is with us”. It doesn’t mean, “God merely made us,” end of story or “God made us to be His slaves” or “God is above us” or even “God wishes He’d stopped creating on the 5th day!” Emmanuel means “God is with us” as in, He is in us, part of us and one of us!!!! So much so, that He subjected Himself to the lowliest of beginnings and the worst of endings so as to experience the gamut of human existence. More importantly for us gathered today, His being “with us” didn’t end with Ascension of Christ. God is still with us today and intervenes in our lives and is part of our lives whether through the message of His Angels or in our dreams or the dreams of others or in this community gathered together or in the reception of Him in the Eucharist or in faces of the people we come in contact with every day, especially those in need. He is here and communicating to us in our thoughts and in our hearts through these experiences.

The Challenge of our readings today is that we need to WAKE UP, be attentive and then ACT or cooperate with the mission God has for each one of us. We must trust in God and not weary Him in our unworthiness like Ahaz in our first reading. God is genuinely concerned about our salvation and is actively working to help us achieve it, in other words, Emmanuel, “God IS with us” to help us in our journey to heaven. But we must do our part by listening and acting in accord with what He is calling us to do. Joseph didn’t wake up and say, “I’ve got to think about this a bit.” He “awoke” and “did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him”
and ultimately this is the most important part. Union with God is the goal we seek, He is our help along the way and He is the one who is with us.

So, “Let the Lord enter; he is the king of glory” as the Psalm response tells us. Let Him come to you and work with you and through you; it’s the only way to truly experience Emmanuel, “God with us”, this Advent and Christmas. If we are able to remain awake and vigilant through faith to this reality, then we can trust that His Presence and His Promise are not a dream but rather the reality of a dream come true.