

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sermon for December 23, 2007
Raymond Raney

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

Welcome to the last Sunday of Advent. Two short days from Christmas. But this day, this interim between that which has yet to come, and that which we celebrate as the event that was once 2,000 years ago, is more than that. Between Advent and Christmas this year we mourn a death, we bless a marriage, and we celebrate a baptism.

The Pascal Candle has been here at the altar since Saturday when we gathered to mark the death of Katherine Eader, the mother of David Eader. In a real sense, we celebrate the death of Katherine. No, it's not that we're happy that she died. We mourn her loss as we comfort Dave and Anna and Beth. Losing a loved one is not an easy thing. We cry for ourselves, not for her. For Katherine, we celebrate because she has closed circle that is the Christian life.

When we are born we inhale for the first time, taking that first breath in to fill our lungs and begin a life of breathing on our own. With that breath we take in the spirit as well, inhaling deeply of the divine, and allowing that spirit to course through our bodies. We do not exhale that first breath until we release the spirit from our bodies with that last breath as air leaves our lungs for the final time. It is a circle of life.

Today we baptize Anika Leigh Hardie, and we open the circle that will not close until the end of her life. She bring her into the body of Christ, into the family of God. What lies ahead of her are the many aspects of the journey we all take.

Shortly we will be sharing one of those landmarks on the journey of Anika's parents, Amanda and Dominique, as we bless their civil union as a Christian marriage.

This is an appropriate day for all of this to happen: the coming together of a couple and their children to be embraced by the Christian family of this congregation.

Last week we noted Mary's role in accepting the request from God that she bear the son of God. Imagine this girl, and she was a girl, somewhere between 12 and 15 years of age, accepting the job of a woman.

This week we not Joseph's role in this divine drama. Joseph, who is a "righteous man", is ready to let Mary go politely. "Hey, I don't know what happened, but I didn't have ... so why don't we just say..." But no, an angel comes to him in a dream, and he says "yes", as Mary did, to accept the role God has asked him to play.

Joseph has said yes to protecting Mary and providing for Jesus. Though he is not the biological father, Joseph is the natural father for Jesus.

Jesus becomes the man we know from the Gospels because of what Joseph taught him growing up. We don't know the details. In the Gospels we know only the events surrounding the nativity, the exile in Egypt, and the incident at the Temple when Jesus was 12. Not much else is revealed to us. There are non-canonical books, scriptures with a small "s" that tell more of Joseph's teachings of Jesus: like the time Jesus struck down a bully for pushing around his friends and himself. Joseph requires Jesus to raise up the bully and teaches him that exercising spiritual power to do harm is not good. Spiritual power should only be used for good and to heal.

Joseph teaches Jesus. We each have the chance to teach not only our own children, but all the children we encounter. We teach by our example. We teach by our kindnesses. We teach by our love. We teach by our presence. And we teach by our being present and listening to what is important to those we meet. Most importantly, we teach with our lives: how we live them, what we do with them, and how we share them with each other. That's what it means to be family.

I reprinted a newspaper clipping in Katherine's memorial bulletin. The clipping was one I found in her family Bible. It was headlined: Where is home?

Where is Home?

Home is where we can live close to the person
we love best and minister to him [or her].

It is where two who love each other, husband and wife,
parent or and child, brother and sister, or, more rarely,
two unrelated friends, can work, rest, play, worship and think together.

A true home is a place where one is sure of being understood, where one
can think aloud, where no veils of words are necessary
to hide the inner meaning of the heart.

It is a place where one's most private affairs can be discussed without fear.

Whether the location of the home is a palace or a hovel,
a city or the country, makes no difference.

A home does not even need to have a definite geographical location. It
may travel as those travel whose love and understanding
make the home.

When we look into the eyes of the person we love most,
see love answer our own, feeling understanding of our varied moods,
the vary thought of place vanishes from our minds.

It is shared work, shared tears, shared laughter, that make a home.

M.F.S.

That's really what you could say about what Jesus was doing with the world: he just called it the Kingdom of God. We are called to make that Kingdom in the here and now, and it just might be easier to think of that as making the world into one big loving family.

As one of the men said who knew Katie when she cooked at the ranch in Roswell. "It didn't matter that you showed up late or unexpectedly. If you came to the door, Mrs. Eader would make room at the table. And she'd make sure you felt welcome."

That's what Jesus is talking about with the kingdom. The Lord's table is open and all are welcome. We're all family.