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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2022
Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Today's gospel tells a remarkable story. Perhaps even more remarkable than the words convey. It's Matthew's very brief account of Jesus' birth, which of course is remarkable enough, but beneath the words is a historical reality that makes it even the more astonishing.

You see, because Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph had married, and because Joseph believed she had committed adultery, he was required *by law* to break off the engagement. And not only that, if Mary had committed adultery, she could have *by law* been stoned to death, and with her, the child destined to become the savior of the world.

But it was while Joseph was sleeping that an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. In his dream, the angel assured Joseph that the child conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit, and the child was to be named Jesus and would save people from their sins.

It was in a dream, while he was sleeping, that God changed Joseph's heart and subsequently the entire rest of human history. God came to Joseph during deep and restoring sleep and Joseph did as God commanded to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. God used the time of night when Joseph was the most vulnerable to open him to trust God's promise and give him peace of mind. And because he was open to God in that time of rest, Joseph was willing to break the law to save Mary, and Jesus, and, by extension, all of us.

Just think of what might have happened if Joseph hadn't gone to sleep that night.

This of course wasn't the only time that God used dreams, the time during sleep, to reveal truth and hope to God's people: In Genesis, Joseph has 2 dreams and interprets 4 more dreams which inevitably result in the family of Jacob—the descendants of Abraham—finding refuge in Egypt to avoid a famine. In the next chapter of Matthew following today's gospel, God will come again to Joseph in a dream to warn him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt to avoid King Herod's massacre of innocent children. Maybe God even uses the time of sleeping, of dreams, to speak to you.

Because this is what we know about God, and about us: God is always coming to us, granting us peace, imparting to us wisdom, and bathing us in grace. And the times we are most open to God to let God in to transform our lives and this world are the times *not* when we are most busy, not when we are most stressed, not when we are living in chaos, but the times we are most at rest, the times we are most vulnerably open to the one who loves, restores, and redeems us.

This time of year, however, we are almost perpetually in a state of heightened anxiety. Because of holiday pressures and memories, we are often grieving or nervous or fearful or exhausted. Our crowded calendars and awkward relationships and holiday expectations lead us to try to control our lives in a way that pushes God out. Ironically in this time of Advent we are so overwhelmed that instead of being in the ideal state of rest and peaceful waiting to receive the presence and promises of God incarnate in Christ, we are so emotionally, spiritually, and physically stuffed that we leave no room for God to work in us. And if we know from this gospel story of Joseph that it takes rest and openness and vulnerability for God to change us and change our world, it's a wonder there's any room left for Jesus, the very reason for Advent in the first place.

The past two Wednesday mornings, I've been lying on the sanctuary floor over there with 6 or 7 others for sessions led by Carolyn Jonson called BCS, which stands for breathing, balancing, connecting,

centering, strengthening, and stretching. We start with our legs resting on a chair while we lie on our back and literally catch our breath and then move our bodies to open them to the movement of the Holy Spirit. As I looked up at the ceiling and the cross last week I was so struck by how open I felt to God's presence and peace. First of all—look up if you can—it's incredibly cool to spend time looking at this beautiful ceiling in our church, seeing the beams and cross that cover us overhead. But mostly it was a sheer gift to stop in the midst of such a busy season to listen to my breath, the life-giving force God put in my body, and then listen to God's call for me that day.

Now I didn't have time for BCS these past two Wednesdays, I have a list a mile long to get done these busy weeks before Christmas, but it was because I chose to be vulnerably open to the one who loves, restores, and redeems me, that I was attuned to God and trusted God's promises.

Because Advent is perhaps the time when you are least at rest, this is the time you are the most invited to rest in order to be open to the God who loves, restores, and redeems you.

This week before Christmas, no matter how busy and stressed you are, and exactly because you are busy and stressed, create the time to stop, rest, dream, be at peace and open yourself to the movement of the Holy Spirit and the ways God is changing you, and through you, changing the world. Here are some ideas:

1. Go to sleep. And when you awaken in the middle of the night and are tossing and turning, pray, especially pray for others. I probably shouldn't tell you that when I toss and turn in the middle of the night, I pray for you, and it puts me right back to sleep. (Don't worry – I resume my prayers for you in the morning.) But when we are sleeping we are more open to God restoring us and guiding us, and sometimes it's in our dreams and in our deepest sleep that God speaks to us most clearly.

2. Come to BCS on Wednesday morning, or do yoga, or come into the church some day this week and lie on a pew or on the floor and look up at the ceiling and realize the deep love and vast life God has for you.
3. Pause before you eat, and perhaps even before every bite, giving thanks for God's nourishment and connecting to the earth through which God provides for you.
4. Allow yourself to sit in the gift of silence. True silence. For as long as you can. Listen to your breath. Be attuned to the one who made you, redeems you, loves you, and restores you.

And don't be surprised what happens when you rest and allow God to work in you. When Joseph was open to God's call in the vulnerability of a dream it literally changed the course of human history. When we are at rest, when we are open to God, God works through us to bring about change and justice until, as we will sing in "Canticle of the Turning" at the end of worship, "the spear and the rod can be crushed by God who is turning the world around."

It was a holy night when the stars were brightly shining that God became incarnate in the world. When the world was at rest, God became one of us.

So Come, O come Emmanuel, and rejoice, dear people of God, for when you are at rest, Emanuel shall come to you. Amen.