

Baccalaureate Mass

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Matthew, the author of our gospel narrative, uses a favorite literary device to get across his point: he “bookends” his stories. That is to say that he introduces a motif at the beginning of his gospel and then repeats it at the end, thus tightly tying the whole thing together. For example, at the beginning of the gospel, he tells the story of the Magi who seek “The King of the Jews.” At end of the gospel, the very same phrase appears written on the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

Today’s gospel contains a bookend. After the angel came to Joseph and told him to stay with Mary, Matthew states that this fulfilled the prophet’s words, “the virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son and they shall call him Emanuel,” a name, he says, which means “God is with us.” At the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel, the name “Emanuel” travels to the very last line where Jesus speaks these words: “And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”

Matthew teaches us that Emanuel, “God with us,” is who Jesus is. The gospel is the story of God’s presence in our lives from beginning to end. Yet we do not often sense or believe that God is with us, especially during times of crisis. A woman who lost her seventeen year old son to suicide wrote, “God never promised that our lives would be free of pain and grief if we believed. The promise is, I will be with you always – Emanuel – even when the pain is so great that we feel utterly deserted.”

Similarly, Anne Donovan, a faithful practicing Catholic, whose baby daughter was still born could give words to her grief and anguish. She reflected on the well meaning efforts of her friends to offer consolation, most of which boiled down to the same thing: “it was God’s will.” That explanation left her tortured, angry and tied her up in knots. She got to a point where, when the phrase came up, she says that she just clenched her teeth to keep from saying something she’d regret.

Anne Donovan, who almost lost her faith with her child, ultimately fell back on Emanuel. She had to believe that somehow in the darkness God is with her – a God who shared with her the pain of losing an only child. Emanuel – God is with us – like a faithful spouse, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in soul-sickness or in health, in life and death and beyond.

Those among us who carry dark memories and heavy burdens, whose hearts are hurting, whose faith is weak, whose doubts are strong, whose anger is justified – may fall back on the bookend message of Jesus, Emanuel, God with us through it all.

In the second reading we catch another glimpse of Emanuel – God with us – in the exhortation, “do not quench the spirit, do not despise the words of prophets.” God speaks to us through our human spirit and the prophetic voices among us.

I am reminded of a scene from “Raisin in the Sun” where Beneatha recalls a scene from her childhood. A large group of kids was sledding down an icy hill when one of them, Rufus, came down too fast and hit the sidewalk. His face split open in front of them all. They were sure he was dead. An ambulance rushed Rufus to the hospital. The next time Beneatha saw Rufus, he had a small red line down his face – nothing else. She said, “I never got over that.” “What?” her sister asked. Beneatha answered, “what one person can do for another, fix him, fix him up—sew up the problem, make him right

again. That was the most marvelous thing in the world. I wanted to do that. This was truly being God. Her sister said, “you wanted to be God?” The response, “[No] I wanted to cure. It used to be so important to me. I wanted to cure. It used to matter. I used to care. I mean about people and how they hurt.” Beneatha used to care but she doesn’t any more. She “quenched the spirit.” She lost the opportunity to truly be God. That can happen to any of us.

The human impulse to heal, to sew up problems, to make things right again is of God. Grace is another word for it. That gentle voice calling us to care for people who hurt is Emanuel. Let us not quench that spirit as Beneatha did, but let that voice be the dominant one in the conversation of our life.

As you leave this University, realize that healing is not the exclusive concern of medicine. Healing can be an aspect of every profession because it is so integral to the human spirit. Healing may be a central concern of your personal and professional lives. May your lives, like the life of Jesus, be bookended by God with us from beginning to end and all moments in between.

Finally, a thought about the prophetic word that the second reading cautions us not to despise. God speaks to us not only through the promptings of our own hearts but also through persons who see what we do not and tell us what we do not want to hear. In every age, certain individuals have a clarity of vision denied to the rest of us and what they point to us threatens our settled way of being in the world and calls us to action. For me, seventeen year old Craig Kielburger, the founder of Free the Children is one of those voices.

Craig talks about meeting children in the cane fields of Brazil who wield huge machetes close to their small limbs. The cane they cut sweetens our breakfast cereal. They dream of easing the hunger pains in their stomachs. He points out that poverty is the biggest killer of children in our world. He reports that the world annually spends \$400 billion dollars on cigarettes, \$160 billion on beer and \$40 billion on golf and notes that it would cost an extra \$7 billion dollars a year to put every child in school by the year 2010, giving them hope for a better life. This is less money that Americans spend per year on cosmetics or Europeans on ice cream. To dismiss this young voice as “naïve” or “poverty as a problem beyond our power to solve” is to despise the words of the prophet.

God is with us – Emanuel – through the prophetic challenges that remind us we are brothers and sisters all; the voices that call us to work together to create a just and peaceful world – no matter the age or the religion – is the voice of God, Emanuel, God with us amidst the agony and the ecstasy that constitute our human condition.

God bless you all. May the education that you take with you be a beacon of light and a source of hope for you and those whose lives you touch. Remember Matthew’s bookend message about Jesus:

“they shall name him Emanuel, which means ‘God is with us’ ...and remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”