

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 2022-12-18  
Isaiah 7:7-10; Matthew 1:18-25; Psalm 80:19

### Do Not Be Afraid

First, I owe you an update about my brother. As I wrote in this last week's e-newsletter, he had been stuck in a snowstorm in Ogallala, NE since mid-morning Tuesday. On Wednesday night, while he was eating supper at a local diner there in Ogallala, he learned that I-80 had at long last opened. Imagine his excitement! His first impulse was to leave right away—so anxious he was to see his girlfriend Bonnie in Golden, CO. But then he said he reasoned with himself: first, he didn't really want to drive in the dark; and second, he had already paid for another night in the motel. Thursday morning, at 6:57, Lois and I received a Messenger text from John. It had just one word: "Colorado," and he had added a happy face with sunglasses. At 10:08, another message: "Arrived! Glorious reunion has begun!" I think we could also call that a glorious "restoration." Let's read together these words from the psalmist: "*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved*" [Psalm 80:19].

So here we are already at the Fourth Sunday of Advent! Hard to believe! Just a reminder that our theme throughout Advent, Christmas, and all the way to Epiphany is "*Restoration Is Near.*"

So God told King Ahaz to ask him for a sign. [*"Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven."* Isaiah 7:11] It could be anything; the sky's the limit—God told him it could be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. Just think of all the wild signs we could ask for!

*"But Ahaz, said, 'I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.'"* Good for Ahaz, right? He obviously knew that the Torah says, in Deuteronomy 6:16: "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*" Except here's the thing. God was inviting him to ask. No, God was telling him to. And you don't "but" God [*show 7:12 again*]. When God tells you to do something, you don't say to God "I will not."

Why did Ahaz say that? Was he afraid? Afraid of God? Was he afraid that God was testing him? Was he afraid he would ask for the wrong thing? Was he afraid that if he went out on a limb and asked God for a sign, God wouldn't give it to him? We know what that's like, don't we? If we ask God for a sign and God doesn't give it to us, it really does a number on our faith, doesn't it? That's happened to me; has it happened to you?

*"Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?'"* I love that word "weary." Isaiah wasn't saying that Ahaz's refusal made God angry; it just made God tired. I don't find that hard to believe, do you? That God gets tired or weary sometimes? And notice that Isaiah says here "my God." He doesn't say "your God" or even "our God." This time it's only "my" God. It's as if Ahaz was in danger of squandered his status as God's child. Or maybe he had already squander it, by refusing to ask God for a sign.

Isaiah continues: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.*" And we have to wonder, is that a promise? Or a threat? Will the sign be good news, or will it be bad news? The

people of Israel were hearing their share of bad news from prophets these days. If Ahaz was afraid before, think what he is now!

*“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”* Now, we’re so used to hearing that verse through Christmas lenses, and assuming it’s a reference to the virgin Mary and Jesus. But imagine Ahaz’ confusion. “What young woman? You can’t be talking about my wife. She’s not young!” Ahaz was probably too confused to catch the most important word in that verse (we could even consider it the most important word in the entire Bible). The word—or in this case, the name—Immanuel. Which Ahaz as an Israelite would have known means “God with us.” God with us. God with us.

Are we afraid? Afraid to ask God for a sign, perhaps? Are we paying attention whenever we hear the word “Immanuel?” Do we catch that reminder that God will be with us? That God is with us? That God always has been with us?

Turns out, there are all kinds of signs. That is, if we are paying attention. Joseph had a dream. *“An angel of the Lord appeared to him,”* Matthew says. I don’t know about you, but this is one of my favorite stories of the whole Christmas season. *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”* There it is! How many times do we hear those words in the Bible, “do not be afraid?” Google says 365 times. That’s one for every day of the year! (Which is about how often we need to hear those words!)

Joseph had good reasons to be afraid. He’d just been handed the bombshell that his betrothed was pregnant. And, he knew he wasn’t the father; that he couldn’t be. What will people think? And say? And do? His soon to be wife had obviously committed adultery. An offense punishable by death. But the angel wasn’t finished. *“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”* In other words, Mary had not committed adultery. God in heaven was the child’s true father. *“She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus.”* So Joseph was to be his earthly father after all! It was the duty of a father to name his child. And in this case, it was to be “Jesus,” the angel in his dream said. Was Joseph paying attention? I bet he was. But are we? Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua, or *yeshua*, which in Hebrew means “Yahweh will save.” Did we catch that? Every time we hear the name Jesus, do we remember what that name means? Jesus. “Yahweh will save.”

*“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,* Matthew so characteristically writes. (He’s all about having the words of prophets be fulfilled. In his Gospel he points that out over and over.) And then he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, from the very passage we just heard: *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.”* And then he adds for the sake of his readers, which Isaiah hadn’t needed to: *“which means, ‘God is with us.’* You see, Matthew believes in signs. Just like Isaiah. Big time.

Now, if we were paying attention, we might have caught that Matthew said *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,”* whereas Isaiah had merely said, *“the young woman is with child and shall bear a son.”* Was Matthew altering Holy Scripture to suit his own purposes? Did the mother of Jesus have to be a virgin for him to be what he was? Fortunately, we don’t have to argue about that now, because it turns out Matthew wasn’t altering Holy Scripture. He was merely quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Which everyone was using in Matthew’s day. And which did actually say *“the*

*virgin shall conceive and bear a son.*” Whew! Matthew’s off the hook. And we can keep on talking and singing about the virgin Mary. Crisis averted.

But let’s not forget that the most important word in this entire passage from Matthew—in fact, in the entire Bible—is Emmanuel. Capital E, Capital I, it doesn’t matter. Either way, it means the same thing. God is with us. God will be with us. God has always been with us. I’d call that quite a sign. And it’s definitely good news! No question about it. But. Are we paying attention?

Amen.

Hymn of response: VT 229, “Unexpected and Mysterious”

Sending: As you go forth this week, savor the stories. And by all means—pay attention!