

Sermon for December 1, 2013

First Sunday of Advent, Matthew 1:18-23

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

As I said earlier, this is the **first** Sunday of the Advent season—the time of arrival or coming. This **begins** our time of waiting for the *Child of Promise* to be born. **So** much celebration is going on during this month as we **anticipate** and also **remember** the reason for this season.

This morning we lit the **first of five** Advent candles—the candle of Hope. Hope is a **natural** instinct. From the moment they are born, babies **cry out** in the hope that someone will attend to their needs. As we grow older it takes a **great** deal to **cancel** out our natural ability to hope. The verses used in the candle lighting prayer for today remind us that hope **sometimes** comes from unexpected and even unpleasant places. For the Apostle Paul, hope was a character-building by product of **suffering** and **endurance**—something he knew **much** about.

Also today we began the new worship setting chosen **just** for this Advent season; I am also going to be preaching a series of **special sermons** especially for this time of year. Readings from the Old Testament prophet **Isaiah** will be read each week—words and prophecies which were written **more than 700** years before the birth of Christ which **connects** those prophecies to the child of promise.

As for some **historical** background: of **all** the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament refers to Isaiah more than any other to indicate **how** Jesus would complete the Old Testament fulfillment of the **coming** Messiah. In our **first** reading for this morning we hear of King Ahaz—King of Judah. This was a king who was being **besieged, attacked, and at war** with neighboring countries: Syria, Northern Israel, and Aram which is now part of Lebanon. He was also a **pagan**, an **idol** worshiper, who looked for signs of God’s favor through **astrologers, soothsayers, and fortune tellers**. He practiced the offering of **human** sacrifices—he even gave his **own son** as a burnt offering.

When **nothing** seemed to work, when his **situation and kingship** was at a dark and dismal time the Lord said to Ahaz, *‘ask a sign of the Lord your God’* and it would be given. God would have given **anything** to him from the **depths** of the world of the dead to the **highest** heavens. Ahaz **refused** and said he would **not** test the Lord—not **even** at the Lord’s command. But, what if King Ahaz did accept God’s offer—and nothing happened—after all he had done some **pretty bad things** in his life? What if we accept God’s offer to ask of a sign and we feel like nothing happens? Where does **our own** faith and belief come into the story?

Here is the **key** to Ahaz’s behavior—his **real** attitude came not only from the fact that he worshipped idols but from his *fearfulness and unbelief*. Ahaz had **no** faith in what God could or would do for him!!! Does that sound familiar to any of

us?? God offers us **anything** from the **highest high** to the **lowest low**, just ask for it and it will be given to us—yet sometimes because of our fearfulness or unbelief in the **power** of God we do *not ask* or worse yet because of this we *do not receive* the blessing offered to us.

This is what Isaiah tells Ahaz in his **unbelief**—“*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman, is with child and shall bear a son, and you shall name him Immanuel—God is with us.*”

What **more** can we ask??? These **same** words were repeated in our gospel reading for this morning. Of **all** the gospel writers **Matthew** is the one who presents the story of Jesus as **fulfillment** of the words spoken through the prophets.

Immanuel—God is with us to seek and to save us. **Immanuel**—unto us is born a savior. **Immanuel**—how perfectly the name fits our Lord. **Immanuel**—the word slips easily from our tongue. It means what it says, *God is with us*. A mortal body, a human soul, came to dwell among us for a **little** while.

Immanuel—God took the one way in which he could tangibly reveal His love; he became one of us. Through the **life** of Jesus Christ he spoke to us with human lips, he looked upon us with human eyes, and he felt human emotions—cried human tears. **Immanuel**—the Son of God with faith beyond comprehension and with the spark of the divine within Him. **Immanuel**—because God was within Him and

God is known. Because of His life and victory over death we **believe** in all that He was, all that God is.

What greater sign can we have than that God is with us than the **birth** of the child of promise which we will be celebrating in a few short weeks? So often we look for a sign that God is with us and we miss what is right in front of us. As God told King Ahaz, “*Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or as high as heaven.*” God offered to show him any kind of a sign to **convince** him to trust God during the **difficult** time that he was going through. It was as though God was saying to Ahaz, “*Ask me for any thing—the sky’s the limit—to confirm that I am with you and will protect you from your enemies.*” The same is ours for the asking. Do not be afraid to ask. Are you looking for a sign from God—look no further.

It took several centuries for the **ultimate** fulfillment of the promise that God made through Isaiah to King Ahaz to take place. The child of promise **was born**, the child was of the **lineage** of the house of David, and the sign **came to pass** just as God promised. **Immanuel**—not only is the child ‘*God is with us*’ but he is also, ‘*God is for us.*’ He came to **deliver** us from our sin—He paid the **ultimate price** for sins he did not commit.

King Ahaz had enemies threatening him from all sides that he was concerned about. **What concerns you?** Maybe we don’t have invading armies to

contend with but what about illness, financial issues, job concerns, depression or sadness, or any number of other concerns especially at this time of the year.

Where is **your** hope? We lit the candle of hope today. I pray your hope is in the **sign** that was **promised** to King Ahaz and to **all** the descendents of David. I pray your hope is in the **name** that was promised through the prophet Isaiah to those who were fearful all those centuries ago. The name is the same name for **we** who are fearful today. Your hope is **Immanuel**.

Today, with our eyes fixed as we wait for the advent of the **child of promise**, we invite God in to **renew our hope** during this season. We acknowledge and celebrate signs of **new life** and give **thanks** for the gift of hope and the **blessing** of the child to come. God is **with us**. God is **for us**. **AMEN**.