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Sermon 12/18/22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Lord, our rock and redeemer.
Amen.

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.”

And so our Christmas cards display pictures of a cute chubby baby, and we place creches on our mantles in which every figure – from the three austere kings to the lowly donkey looking adoringly at the figurine of the tiny baby tucked in the hay.

I don't know how many of you came to see Ahavah, but if you did you would remember that the climax of the first act is when Mary and Joseph come out from the dark stable in a stream of light and surrounded by adoring and jubilantly dancing angels to present this very real and very precious little baby. Often at this point the audience breaks out in spontaneous applause.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, and we repeat this very familiar phrase of scripture -A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and we shall call him Immanuel.

Sometimes, these stories of advent become so familiar that we lose track of how astounding this plan of God's really is, sometimes we struggle to grasp what the birth of this baby in the most out of the way place and in the most unusual of circumstances might actually mean to us, today, here at the end of 2022 and during the difficult and complicated times our world is currently in. Sometimes what we need is for the story to become estranged from our associations of it and to become a bit more complicated so we might see anew what has become common place.” (Garcia-Andrieu, 115)

I think reciting the great litany this morning – the fourth Sunday of Advent has begun this practice of estranging these familiar words of scripture. In our gathering together this morning we have centered our meditation on our great need for God's mercy and deliverance. In my Advent meditations this year, this has been a theme. On the first day of advent I wrote in my journal a verse from one of Peter's epistles which reads –“We have a most reliable prophetic word, and you would do well to pay attention to it, just as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place.” I began this season of waiting and expectation with the darkness and my great need and desire for light.

This morning, I want to continue to follow the lead of our lectionary. I want us to step into the Old Testament reading from Isaiah and travel back to Jerusalem in the days of King Ahaz. Ahaz was the young king of Judah in 734 BC. The Hebrew people had become divided into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom of Israel – notorious for its idol worship – and the southern kingdom of Judah. All around the ancient world, nations were falling to the dreaded Assyrian Empire and now young Ahaz is facing a deep crisis because the Northern kingdom and its neighbors were aligning themselves to take a stand against the giant Assyrian empire and together they were threatening little Judah in an attempt to get them to join. Verse 6 tells us that they were conspiring against Ahaz, saying, “Let's march up against Judah, tear it apart, capture it for ourselves, and install another king.” Ahaz was hard pressed from all directions.

It is at this point that the prophet Isaiah comes to Ahaz and encourages him to “be careful, stay calm, don't fear, and don't lose heart. God won't let this happen Verse 4

But as the story goes, Ahaz doesn't want the assurance that the prophet Isaiah is offering. According to the court records found in 2 Kings, Ahaz has already decided what he is going to do. He has sent a message to the biggest fish in the pond of the ancient world, the one that was gobbling up all of the smaller fish – Ahaz had asked the king of mighty Assyria to come and deliver him. In 2 Kings 16:7-8 Ahaz tells the Assyrian king, “I

am **your** servant and **your** son. Come up and deliver me.” And then he sent the silver and gold from the temple of God to the Assyrian king as a bribe”

This is where we first find the words of this familiar Christmas passage about a baby being born. In the midst of Ahaz’s rejection of God’s promise to hold him fast in the midst of this approaching darkness, in the midst of his decision to betray his covenant relationship with the God of his people and instead to seek help and refuge from the most destructive and ever-increasing domineering and spreading empire, God himself beseeches Ahaz to ask God for a sign of God’s presence and protection. After all, what God has always wanted was for the Hebrew people to be God’s people. But Ahaz won’t ask, He won’t bother God for a sign or for help – and instead he hands over the very instruments of the worship of God to the Assyrian king and offers himself as a son of Assyria.

And what does God do? Does he utterly abandon Ahaz and the rest of Judah? No, It is here in the darkest place of fear and in the rejection of hope in God that we read the words of the Old Testament lesson.

Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

This is the sign... a baby ... a young woman and a baby will signify that God will continue to be with us even though we may have rejected God and placed our trust instead in some impressive conquering system of the world around us.

In order to truly appreciate the gift that is the baby Jesus at Christmas, we must first feel the darkness of the temptation to reject God and his urge for us to be careful, stay calm, don’t fear, and don’t lose heart in the face of encroaching darkness and peril.

This is one of the reasons why Ahavah – our Christmas ballet - begins in the garden of Eden. I know this ballet very well, in fact one year my husband and I played the roles of Adam and Eve. This year, however, I spent Ahavah behind the stage, cuing dancers and making sure everyone had their costumes on correctly. There is a tv screen backstage on which the dancers can watch what is happening on the stage and the shepherds were sitting on the floor watching the first part of the show as they waited for the part of the story when the angel tells the shepherds to look for a sign that God has sent a savior – that newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger. As these three young dancers waited, They were watching the show as Adam and Eve danced with God in the newness of the garden... and then they watched as the serpent lured Adam and Eve away from their dance with God... and they watched as the young man dancing the role of God was left alone on one side of the stage as Adam and Eve took on the dance steps of the serpent and abandoned the dance with God. And as they watched that scene come to a close, as darkness fell on the stage, one little shepherd let out the deepest sigh and shook her head and with heavy sadness said, “Poor God!” This little dancing shepherd could feel the weight of the darkness.

And what is God’s response? Well, in Ahavah, the next scene is the annunciation to Mary. “Look, the virgin will conceive and bear a son and they shall call him Immanuel!”
But really, a baby? Why is the birth of a baby to a young woman a sign of God’s immanence, of God with us even though we have turned from God and walked into the midst of the heavy darkness of systems of domination bearing down on us? **Evenlyn Underhill wrote a poem called "Immanence" and it begins - "I come in the little things, saith the Lord." And so God does, in mustard seeds and babies, in the small steps toward reconciliation, in the little turns of thought, and the slightest change of tone, in the hint of a question or inquiry, or the briefest challenge to the firmest of opinions. The little things begin to make room for us to receive the kingdom of God. "In the fullness of time, God entered time, and joined us in our limitations."** “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.”

I held my 6-week-old grandson the other day. His only act of autonomy is to cry and kick his tiny legs. That is the only way he can communicate in the world. He must be held, dressed, fed, rocked, carried and understood without words. Limitations, ones that we share. This is the sign we are told to look for. These are the places where God enters in, as Immanuel did on that first Christmas. These are the places where God's presence dwells and works.

The sign that Ahaz rejected became the sign that Joseph and Mary and the shepherds received – a baby, a small, limited baby becomes God with us – Immanuel

But I want to carry this story one step more before we leave these scriptures behind us this morning. I think the audience that Matthew was writing his gospel to would know that this reference to the sign of a baby born in unlikely circumstances and named Immanuel originated from the days of Ahaz when the whole nation had chosen to reject God and seek refuge instead in some conquering worldly system. In fact, I think that Paul too, is making this very same connection as he begins his letter to the Christians in Rome. He is writing to the young church in Rome, which is the capital of another rather large and ever-growing system of power. And he begins his letter by placing all of his hope and his trust in that one who was the baby who was proclaimed ahead of time through the prophets. The one who was the “Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,”

And so, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, right here at the end of 2022, In the midst of all that bears down on us, that frighten us, that tempt us to trust in them for deliverance... we have this sign, this light... a baby who is

Jesus Messiah, name above all names, blessed redeemer, Immanuel, the rescue for sinners, the ransom from heaven, Jesus messiah, Lord of all.

Amen.