

## Fourth Sunday of Advent – Bob Munshaw

Mt. 1:18-25, Is. 7:10-16

The young woman will have a son and shall call him Immanuel ...says the prophet Isaiah, a line that is echoed by Matthew in the Gospel reading. Immanuel ... it is a Hebrew name, and Matthew explains that it means God is with us

Well, I heard on the news that as we begin Christmas week, it is supposed to be cold and snowy this morning ... and that tomorrow it is supposed to be cold and icy, with probably a slim hope that it will warm up later in the week ... and I guess that is fitting, because on this 4<sup>th</sup> and last Sunday of Advent ... in this period of anticipation for the arrival of Christ, we are going to focus a little on the way that hope, in the form of Immanuel, breaks through.

The story is told of a little girl and her father. They were returning from the funeral of their dearly loved mother and wife. Some kind neighbors invited them to spend a few days with them so they wouldn't be alone in the house with all its sad memories. However, the father decided it would be better to go home. That night the father placed the little girl's bed next to his, but neither could fall asleep. Finally the child said, "Daddy, it's dark, I can't see you. But you're there, aren't you?" "Yes, dear, Daddy's here right next to you. Go to sleep." The little girl finally dropped off to sleep. In the darkness and the depth of sorrow, the father in tears said aloud, "O Heavenly Father, it's so dark, and my heart is overflowing with sorrow. But You are there, aren't You?"

If they are anything this morning, the Scripture readings are stories of hope peaking through, and hope breaking through in situations that seem a little hopeless.

The words of the prophet Isaiah were written at a rough time in the history of Israel.

We don't know the exact year of the prophecy, but we do know that King Ahaz was wretch. He was 20 years old when he became king of Judah, and he reigned for 16 years. Near the end of his reign, the northern kingdom of Israel was decimated by the Assyrians, who then began to put all sorts of pressure on Ahaz and the Southern kingdom of Judah. The Isaiah passage is one of three sections of Scripture that spend time with Ahaz and his reign. We also read of Ahaz in II Kings 16, and in II Chronicles 28.

Ok, let's be clear here. None of us would have enjoyed being king of Judah at this time. First, Ahaz was dealing with Israel aligning with the Arameans to attack Jerusalem, and then there was the immediate threat of the terrifying Assyrians who would eventually thump just about everybody in the area including Egypt, Babylonia and Persia. Sometimes it is good to be king,

but in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, not so much, and we can certainly understand Ahaz fear, except for one thing, he forgot the truth of Immanuel.

We read early in Isaiah 7 that God sent Isaiah to Ahaz with a couple messages. In the first, God says to Isaiah – Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart. The immediate attacks you fear from Israel and the Arameans will not happen. Then, we have the message from our reading this morning, and in it, again God is telling Ahaz to trust him – Ask for a sign, he says. But Ahaz just gives him some pious answer about not testing God ... and answer that neither Isaiah, nor apparently God likes. So, God gives him a sign anyways. It is an immediate sign. Some young woman is about to give birth to a son, whom she will name Immanuel, and Ahaz, you just watch what will happen to the world around you during the youth of this child.

This was perhaps Ahaz' big chance. I imagine that he could have realized his mistakes and turned back to trusting God. He could have reflected on the name of the child in the prophecy and he could have turned with the little faith he had, like the little girl and her dad, laying in the darkness, and prayed — O Heavenly Father, it's so dark, and my heart is overflowing with fear. But You are there, aren't You?

But, not Ahaz. All three accounts of Ahaz are miserable. The author of Kings describes his reign like this: In the seventeenth year of Pekah son of Remaliah, Ahaz son of Jotham king of Judah began to reign. 2 Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God. 3 He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. 4 He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree. It's all bad here, and it all centers around Ahaz' inability to recognize that even in the darkness, Immanuel.

Matthew, in the way that only Gospel writers could do, saw this prophecy fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Let's jump forward 700 hundred years from Ahaz and Isaiah to our gospel reading.

As we approach this story, I want to ask you to wipe your mind clear of all your own personal history of Christmas, and try to approach this with fresh eyes. Almost everything that we take for granted at Christmas is missing from this story. At this point in this story, there is no Santa yet. He must come in John's lost account of the birth of Jesus. There are no Christmas trees, no presents with bows. There are no Christmas Carols, no holly, no Christmas parties, no white elephant gifts. No one has a week off or even two in the middle of winter to visit family. There are not even shepherds, or wise men being guided by one special star

The only thing that would seemingly be exciting to the world that year, was that Caesar Augustus, according to Luke's account of the story, would be conducting a census, which meant that everyone was going to have to check in at their home towns to get counted.

If you could somehow wipe out all the history that you have of Christmases past, and somehow, in some way approach the story fresh, what you have leading up to that first Christmas is a young to middle age man, and a very young woman. They are in love. They will be getting married soon.

In that day, they would have been set up by their families, and would have become engaged because the families thought it was a good match. He was an up and coming carpenter. I can't really see Mary dancing around singing match maker match maker make me a match find me a find, catch me a catch – but maybe I'm wrong. Mary does sing a beautiful song that is recorded in Luke 1. Anyways, she was kinda quiet, but seemed to have such a sweet disposition, and talk about a young woman of character. Hers was impeccable. It was a good match.

So, Joseph is thinking that it's a great match, he's already to settle down, and then Mary comes to him with this crazy story. They're not married yet. They are betrothed to each other, which means that they are committed to the other person, but enduring a one-year engagement period. Joseph is no spring chicken. He knows where babies come from ...

Can you imagine Mary telling him. How would she have even approached him, this young woman who surely knew the rules of her society. She could have been completely disgraced in a public divorce. It was even possible, if unlikely, that she could have been stoned. –So, one wonders, did she come with a sense of excitement ... with a glow of wonder on her face and in her eyes ... or was she nervous from the beginning. Did she gush with excitement about what she knew to be the truth, or did she trip over her words, knowing how fantastic the story was going to sound. She had to tell him, of course. Babies can only be kept secret for so long. And like I said ... Joseph knew the regular way that babies come along.

In some manner, Mary told Joseph – God did this. God is going to do something ... is doing something wonderful among us – and it was all just a little too fantastic for Joseph. He's angry ... he's hurt ... he's confused – he feels like someone has kicked him in the gut. Everything had seemed to be going so well. The planning and anticipation had brought so much joy to his life, and now he just felt sick. Because he was a food and kind man, he decided that he would dismiss her quietly.

Perhaps, if we had been able to listen to Joseph in the midst of his pain and feeling of betrayal, we could have heard him praying as he is on the verge of sleep – O Heavenly Father, it's so dark, and my heart is overflowing with sorrow. But You are there, aren't You?

... and then he begins to dream ... and in the dream, an angel comes with a confirmation of Mary's story – the child is from God, through the Holy Spirit- Joseph, you can marry Mary, and be merry. Name the child Jesus, or Yashua, which means God saves ... and don't forget Joseph, Emmanuel, God is with you, and God is with us.

That's how the first Christmas story started – a fantastic story given to Mary, and a fiancé who just could not believe it.

And so, when we feel lost and hopeless, crippled and broken by life, we can turn to God with confidence like the Psalmist who in the 80<sup>th</sup> Psalm repeats three times, Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Or at the very least, when we feel most lost and alone, if all we can do is cry out with the broken-hearted – O Heavenly Father, it's so dark, and my heart is overflowing with sorrow. But You are there, aren't You, and we can take hope in the message of that very first Christmas – even if all seems beyond hope, Immanuel – God is with us. Amen