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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 4, 2022

4th Sunday of Advent/Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-16

Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7

Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon Title: “Hope Is On The Way!”

Theme

Today Isaiah prophesies that a young woman will bear a son and name him Emmanuel. The gospel is Matthew’s account of the annunciation and birth of the one named Emmanuel, God-with-us. During these final days of Advent we pray, “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” a beloved hymn based on the O Antiphons, ancient prayers appointed for the seven days preceding Christmas. On this final Sunday of Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth of the one born to save us from the power of sin and death.

Texts:

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁰The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore 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. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7

¹Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of

holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel: Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us."²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Sermon

Finally a Gospel Reading that sounds Christmasy!

Each of the Gospel writers begins their Gospel story differently.

Mark's Gospel begins with the adult John the Baptist and his ministry and then the adult Jesus entered the scene to be baptized by John.

John's Gospel begins with ... the cosmic beginning! Then continues with adult John the Baptist and his ministry, and then the adult Jesus entered the scene to be baptized by John.

Luke's Gospel, begins with the *nativity of John the Baptist*, and then he goes into great detail about Mary's divine conception of Jesus, and the interaction between these two pregnant mothers, Elizabeth and Mary.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a long genealogy of 17 begats, as the King James Version calls them, beginning with Abraham and going father to son, and son to son to son, and so on till he gets to Joseph.

The first Advent after I was ordained I had someone read those first 17 verses of Matthew's gospel in church on Sunday morning and the reader did a memorable job because I asked him to read it as if it was the most boring thing he'd ever read – and it may well have been. People still talk about that.

The genealogy finally ends with Joseph, except that Matthew plays a trick on us. He traces this royal pedigree, and at the last minute, tells us that Joseph is not the biological father of this new baby, the one we celebrate at Christmas. Scandalous! More on that in a moment.

After the genealogy, Matthew continues,

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Put yourselves in Mary's sandals. How would you begin to try to explain that to your parents, and Joseph, the man you are engaged to? Matthew doesn't tell us how those conversations went down but he does tell us that

¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Back to the scandal barely mentioned and hardly noticed in the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew concludes:

¹⁶...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So according to Matthew, Jesus *is* the son of Mary, but Joseph *is only* the husband of Mary. But notice that the angel called Joseph a "son of David," a very important and necessary detail. In the ancient world, lineage ran through the father, and if Jesus is to be the long-awaited Messiah of God, then he has to be from the line of David. We could argue about the legitimacy of Jesus' pedigree, but to Matthew, it seems not to have mattered.

There are more important details to notice about this narrative. Notice that Joseph was visited by the angel at night in a dream when his guard was down. It was then that we are told that an angel came and said to him,

"^{20b}Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

Now that is probably what Mary tried to tell Joseph! But who would believe that kind of story? But when the same message comes from the mouth of an angel, a messenger of God, one sent from heaven to earth, a message given from outside our normal categories of experience and understanding, well, nothing could have prepared Joseph, or I dare say, any of us, for that kind of experience.

It appears to me that God's objective for us *is not* to be able to explain this text. No, God's objective for us is to be *dazzled* at Christmas time; that something is happening beyond our normal categories of human experience and understanding. This is a baby, a wonder, and a gift that is designed to move us beyond ourselves.

Back to Matthew's conclusion of the lineage of Jesus, I already alluded to the fact that the baby has no named earthly father; and in this family, like every family, it is a scandal when a baby has no named father. Joseph is obediently at the edge of scandal, but that is not the point. The point is that the baby is from the Holy Spirit.

Now we need to get by all of the silly speculations that usually surface this time of year about Mary's pregnancy and instead notice that this new thing comes because God's Holy Spirit stirs *among us*. The Bible is largely a reflection of how God's Holy Spirit makes things new.

- It was God's Holy Spirit in Genesis 1 that created a new heaven and a new earth.
- It was God's Holy Spirit, God's breath that blew the waters back in Egypt and let our ancestors depart from slavery.
- It was God's Holy Spirit that called prophets and apostles and martyrs to do dangerous acts of obedience.
- It was God's Holy Spirit that came upon the disciples in Acts and created a new community of obedience and mission.
- And, now, in today's Gospel Reading, it was God's Holy Spirit that began something new when the world was exhausted, when imagination failed, and when lives were shut down in hopelessness. God's Holy Spirit broke in and said "Hope Is On The Way!"

That is what Matthew is telling us, that God's Holy Spirit stirred and caused something utterly new in the world. God caused this new baby who has changed everything *among us*.

Also notice that the angel gave Joseph two names for the baby. Names are very important in the ancient world, and to a lesser degree, today. First, the angel said,

"²¹You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The Hebrew name Jesus is the verb, *he saves*. Imagine! At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of a baby named *he saves*. Many babies in the Old Testament were named *he saves*. It is the word translated as *Joshua*, *Isaiah*, and *Hosea*. Each of those names means *he saves*, and each of those men *saved* Israel. And now Jesus *saves* all of creation.

- Jesus *saves* us from sin and guilt.
- Jesus *saves* us from death and destruction.
- Jesus *saves* us from despair and hopelessness.
- Jesus *saves* us from poverty and sickness and hunger - in all of the stories of Jesus that the church remembers, it is Jesus who *saves*.

It could be said that Advent is about being ready for the one who saves, not only in ancient times but the one who saves us too!

So what are the situations in your life, the life of your family, community, country, and world that you consider hopeless? I am here to remind you that "Hope Is On The Way!"

The second name that the angel gave to the baby is Emmanuel, which means, *God is with us*. It is the faith of the church that in Jesus Christ, God is decisively present in the world and brings hope that all things can be made new. And in the New Testament, we have all of that evidence that wherever Jesus went, he showed up where people were in need, and he saved them - lepers, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the unclean, even the dead. His very presence made new life possible then, and the church today is made up of people who are still willing to be dazzled by the reality of God incarnate who still comes to be with us in this season of need and hopelessness, all through this miraculous baby. * Are you one of those people? Then "Hope Is On The Way!"

So Matthew prepares us right at the edge of Christmas. He gave us an angel's message in a dream that is beyond our categories of experience or understanding. He told us that it is God's Holy Spirit that makes all things new through this baby, and he named the baby twice.

The baby is named *he saves*, and Jesus does indeed still save us from all that destroys and is hopeless.

And the baby is named *God is with us*, and so for us who enjoy the Christian life, we know that we are not alone.

Finally, notice that this story does not ask us to do anything. And isn't that a relief in this busy season? I believe this story invites us to be dazzled! Dazzled once again; for me, the 63rd time, and I never get tired of it. It invites us to ponder that, while our world sometimes feels unsavable, here is the baby named, *he saves*.

At times, our world and our lives may look and feel abandoned, but through this baby named *God is with us*, our spirits are revived and our hope is renewed.

So I guess if anything at all is required of us from this story it is that we are prepared to have our realities, our lives, and our world, (more specifically our disappointments, our shame, our guilt, and our hopelessness) contradicted by this gift from God. This is indeed Good News! Hope Is On The Way!

Prayer

Merciful God, in this place right now there are probably people who are proud and ashamed, haughty and arrogant, humiliated and embarrassed – none of which are characteristics that your Son lifts up as virtuous.

Some of us think pretty highly of ourselves and don't know why others can't be more like us, and still others are so beaten down by the results of our lives that we can't bear to lift our eyes. And yet you looked down from heaven and had compassion on your creation and sent your only Son to be God with us. Excuse us if we have trouble with this idea.

Outside of our faith in you, no one has ever shown us that kind of love and acceptance, so excuse us if we seem to not get it. Perhaps it is enough for us to just be dazzled by the thought of you. Accept that as our praise in Jesus' name. Amen