

Sunday, December 18, 2016
The Rev. Hannah Dreitcer
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes from Isaiah 7:10-17. We are still in the early part of Isaiah, when the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile are anticipated horrors that have not yet come to pass. Listen for God's word.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. 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. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For 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.

The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria." Amen.

Our second reading comes from the first chapter of Matthew, verses 18-25. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

Now 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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The title of the meditation: God Is With Us

Text: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." Isaiah 7:14

Let us pray: God of promise, you have given us a sign of your love through the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Keep our minds open like Joseph's, so that we might hear your Word of love. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

One year, when I was in high school, some of us conned our less-churched friend Jamie into playing Joseph in the Christmas pageant. A regular youth group attendee, Jamie had only been to a handful of church services, and I suspect he had never before seen a pageant.

He spent Saturday night at a friend's house, playing video games till dawn, and arrived at church minutes before worship, groggy and slow. We grabbed him, threw him into a robe, tied a sheet around his head, and told him, "Follow that baby!"

Bewildered, disorientated, suddenly the center of attention, he followed the baby.

Mary was all smiles and hospitality throughout the pageant. She quietly admired little girl angels and calmed toddler lambs. And she juggled baby and presents when the pint-sized magi decided they weren't going anywhere until they had personally handed their boxes to the mother of our Lord.

Jamie sat next to her through it all, unmoving, exhausted, dazed, confused, and paralyzed by the all the commotion. He was the PERFECT Joseph.

We don't know much about Joseph. Jamie's unintentionally Method approach to his character portrayed Joseph as the helpless new father, overwhelmed by the fuss and attention, and exhausted by the journey from Nazareth and the trouble finding shelter.

We don't know much about Joseph, because he doesn't show up often in the gospels. For some reason, possibly an early death, he makes no appearance during Jesus' adult life.

We know he was a carpenter. We know he was a pious man, and a poor one, for he regularly took his little family to the Temple, but could only afford to sacrifice a pair of pigeon doves when he presented his infant son.

We know he was descended from kings, for Matthew opens with his genealogy, traced back to Abraham through Solomon and David. And, of course, this genealogy isn't introduced as his, but rather as that of Jesus, his son, who was not his son at all.

And this has provided some confusion, since Jesus came from Mary and the Holy Spirit, and the body of Joseph and the line of kings from which he came played no part. Yet the genealogy of Jesus is traced through Joseph, his legal father.

One Advent, when I was about ten, my mom preached a sermon widely advertised in advance as an R-rated sermon. I don't know what it was about, since the R-rated was very seriously meant, and all of us under 18 were banished from the sanctuary that Sunday morning. But considering the season and the rating, I suspect it had something to do with the conception of Christ. And as I prepared to preach today, I found myself wishing I, too, could give such a warning and an age-limit, so that we might speak frankly of all our anxieties and confusions and questions about the Virgin Birth and everything related.

And it seems extra necessary and extra out of place, for in this particular holiday season, it seems that everything we do is done for children. Everything is jolly and joyful, and adults find themselves speaking slyly over the heads of little ones, trying to communicate covertly.

And I find myself still wanting to offer a warning about the content of this sermon, but it is no longer for what we name adult material. Instead, it is for violence and disturbing images. For all week long, as I've read Isaiah and Matthew, I've also been reading the news of Aleppo. And how quickly it becomes apparent that our readings are as blood-soaked as those Syrian streets.

Our passage from Isaiah could practically come directly from the headlines and tweets of several years ago, as it speaks of the imminent destruction of a nation by those who were once brothers

and fellow citizens. Once the Israelites had one country, ruled by one king, but war has split them, and now there are two.

Ahaz, the king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, has heard that the king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, has allied with another king, and that these joint forces are coming to attack Jerusalem. Full of fear, Ahaz is met by the prophet Isaiah, who speaks a hard word of comfort-- God is with them, but worse is coming.

A young woman is already pregnant, Isaiah tells Ahaz, and before that child will be able to make moral decisions for himself, these current enemies will be defeated by a greater threat. Soon a greater army will march against them, and Jerusalem and all of Judah will be laid to waste. The city will become rubble, men captive or dead, women wounded, children silenced.

A remnant shall return, Isaiah promises Ahaz in a prophecy immediately before today's reading, but even within this hope is desolation—for only a remnant of the people will be left.

And the gospel of Matthew contains its own remnant and bloodshed. Today we hear of Joseph's dream, but it is only his first dream. The week after next we will hear of his other dream, the one that warns him to take his wife and child and flee to a strange and distant land, for Herod is slaughtering children. And Joseph's family survives, but they are only a remnant escaping violent death.

Here in this country we don't know this kind of destruction and terror anticipated in Isaiah and Matthew. But we have seen it in Aleppo this week. We have seen what a city laid to waste looks like, what the remnant of a people looks like, and we have seen the faces of refugees, of fathers fleeing death with their families and trying to make homes in strange and distant lands so that their children are not among the thousands slaughtered.

We don't know this kind of violence and destruction. But we see it. Even if we try not to, it is there.

And we do know violence. Whether it be the gun violence of Chicago, the destruction of abuse, the devastation of addiction, the ravages of cancer, the shattering of grief, the bitterness of loneliness, the hopelessness of despair: we have each known violence.

Not to be trite, but life is R-rated, and inappropriate, and almost impossible to explain to children.

Our world is broken, and so heart-breaking.

And into all of this we have the story of Joseph, a poor carpenter descended from kings, who will probably die the early death of accident or ancient medicine. An upright, righteous man, whose dreams of his future are destroyed by news of apparent betrayal. And he responds to his presumed betrayer with wounded and broken kindness, deciding to set her aside and leave her to an unknown future of shame. And this is an upright and kind gesture, for it saves her from the violent fate that could be hers if he chose.

But then he has a dream.

I have to say, I tend to gravitate toward Mary rather than Joseph, for when Mary receives news from the angel that she will bring Christ into the world she sings the most magnificent song of hope and trust in the might and justice of God's kingdom, words that bring comfort and strength in the hardest of times.

Joseph sings no such song. He is entirely silent, speaking not a word of dialogue in this reading.

But he has a dream.

He dreams that this unexpected, unwanted child is a promise, an ancient promise of comfort and of change.

Mary got the real deal, an angel of the Lord appearing before her and giving her honor. Joseph only gets the dream of an angel and a promise. But upon waking, he changes his mind, and he does something unexpected. He acts compassionately, trusting in this late night prompting to do something completely strange and surprising.

He takes Mary as his wife, knowing her child is not his, but allowing the world to think it is. Hurt though he might be, he chooses not just the passive kindness of quietly setting her aside, but rather the full-bodied love of becoming her husband and raising her child, protecting her name, her future, and providing life for this child he names Joshua, “God saves”—Jesus, in the Greek.

We don’t tend to get angels. We don’t tend to get Mary’s concrete promise that Christ is concretely with us. For us, God’s word might come more like it did to Joseph—in the silent and impossible promptings of our heart, stirring us not to loud proclamation but to quiet action.

His hopes and dreams for the future wounded, his pride injured, his trust seemingly betrayed, Joseph still chooses life. And not just life, but the most life! He chooses to be a part of this unexpected life. He chooses love, not just righteousness. And he chooses the possibilities of the unknown. And in so choosing he becomes Christ’s guardian. He protects and nurtures Jesus and his mother, finding ways for life even in the most desperate of times.

The world is broken and heart-breaking. We don’t have to look very far to lose the jolliness and joy we want our children to know this season. Sometimes it feels like there is this gaping abyss of despair and anguish just past the surface of things, whether in our own lives or in the blood-soaked streets of Aleppo.

But God’s promise shows up most clearly in the midst of devastation.

In the midst of destruction, in the midst of betrayal, in the midst of war and hurt and fear and every kind of violence, God offers Immanuel. God offers a child. Innocent, vulnerable, and so small.

And in this child, in the time of Isaiah and in the time of Joseph, God offers Immanuel. At this point, I think that name means as much to us as it did to those Hebrew-speakers: Immanuel. God is with us.

We are assured of God’s presence. And this assurance is in not in the might of kings and armies and empires and weapons. This assurance comes as a child. And children need to be protected.

Through the promise of Immanuel we are called to be like Joseph. We are called to listen to the silent and unexpected promptings of our hearts, to choose not just righteousness but love. We are called to be changed by this love, called into action, quiet or otherwise.

We are called, like Joseph, to recognize the possibility of God, and to adopt God into our own lives. Just as Joseph nurtured the infant Christ, so we must nurture life and protect all its possibilities, whether it be our own or that of a Syrian stranger.

And just as Joseph opened his home and his heart to a child that was not his, we are called to see and care for Christ in those who are not ours, in those who are not like us, in those who may even seem to be a threat to us.

In the midst of destruction and pain we are promised Immanuel. God is with us, to comfort and to change.

And so maybe at that first Nativity Joseph was indeed exhausted, bewildered, and a bit useless. After all, he's been having some life-changing dreams.