

An Advent Song of Ascents

Isaiah is our anchor text for this Advent worship series. But Psalms gives us the mood, theme, or even soul. “I was glad when they said to me ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” The opening line from Psalm 122 captures something of the Advent spirit this year. From “I was glad” to “go to the house of the Lord.” We are singing a song of ascent this Advent season.

Let us go up. Up, why up? Going to God is always up. Going to worship is always up. That was a geographic reality for the Jewish people. Jerusalem was built on a hill, so no matter which direction you approached, you were going up. And since true worship could only happen in the temple, let us go up to worship is the description of the approach.

But what are we approaching? Well, worship of course. And something more. This is Advent, the season of anticipation, of watching and waiting – active waiting. Christmas? Well, no and yes. We’re not trying to be mysterious here, but there is definitely a no and yes to that question.

No, the season of Advent isn’t really designed to be a countdown to the celebration of Christmas. It is a time of preparation for Christ’s return and the establishment of the kin-dom of God. It is a reminder that we are heading someplace; we are works in progress; we are longing for something more. That’s the upward call of Advent. We sing an Advent song of ascent as we climb up to worship in that new reality, that new way of being in the world. Not that this is a human-made reality, but that we are longing for this completion. We are looking forward.

At the same time, we are indeed looking back. Yes, we are anticipating Incarnation, the time when God broke into our history and became present in an astonishing way. And we look forward to when Emmanuel – God with us – will be how we live always. We remember Christmas, the real depth and power of this singular act and the child who lived God’s presence among us, something that even the worst of the commercialism cannot ultimately overcome. We can grumble about how we’ve lost the true meaning of Christmas in this crass and cynical age, and perhaps we should. But we can also be surprised at how something pure and wonderful can appear in the most unlikely places, from the

most unlikely sources to remind us that we are all longing for something more, something of eternity and of the beloved community described by the one whose birth we celebrate. That is anticipation worthy of singing Advent songs of ascent.

For more on the origins of Advent click here:

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/where-did-the-season-of-advent-come-from>.

First Sunday of Advent – Up to Restoration

November 27, 2022

[Isaiah 2:1-5](#), [Psalm 122](#)

Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

It's Advent! Surely the season speaks for itself; no need for notes from us, right? Well, there are always some questions that we ask this time of year. How soon should the Christmas decorations go up? When can we start singing Christmas carols? All those are the usual questions the worship leaders struggle with year after year. While we might have recommendations and there might be traditions and theological reflections on practice that can inform your responses to these and similar questions, in the end, it is up to you to determine what works best in your context. How do you best prepare your people, your community, and your neighborhood not just for another celebration of the Christmas season, but anticipation of the fulfillment of the process of the kin-dom of God? How are we looking forward and living out that call in our worship and in our living as the body of Christ in this place?

We believe that anticipatory joy is the characteristic of this season that best embodies this living in hope that Advent evokes. We sing of this joy; we move in this joy; we pray in this joy; and we go out in this joy, week after week after week. We invite you to an Advent Song of Ascents.

This is not a blind joy or a joy that neglects the brokenness and the need that surrounds us. If anything, it opens our eyes to what is really happening in the world and in us. It calls us back to a sense of watchful waiting for signs of God's kingdom breaking out in surprising places, at unexpected times, among people we might not have chosen. Our worship then turns us outward this season. We ask, "What do we see? What do we hear, followed by what are we doing about it?" How are we living the promise in our communities right now? How are we lighting a light that others might see and find their way into this relationship?

What stories will we tell? What examples will we live out? How will we make our space ready to receive the one who comes and the family invited to share? We can choose songs about anticipation and hope, not just completion. We can pray prayers that lean into the not yet and the invitation. We can pledge ourselves to the task of preparing the way and shouting in the wilderness that God is near to the brokenhearted. We can light the lights that speak of our confidence and joy that God is among us and desires to be known.

The rituals we perform in this season also point to joy. Whether they are familiar, like lighting the candles on an Advent wreath, or new ways of praying or moving during the worship time, rituals give shape to our experience and help us deepen our emotive connection. Even "low church" worship that seems liturgy free has rituals and patterns that move throughout the gathered time – gathering, Word, response and sending in its simplest form. But whatever your pattern, Advent is a journey upward to praise and restoration. Let us move forward with joy.

PREACHING NOTES

Psalms 122 invites us to rejoice or to be glad. Is there a difference? "I was glad when they said to me . . ." It is time to go, time to get moving, time to get up from here and go where God is, where God is experienced. "I was glad." Most of those to whom you are preaching this week are glad to be there—or were glad at one time. Has coming to worship lost something? Is the gladness no longer there? Or is it buried under the burdens of living? We are laden with so many things it is hard to find that childlike gladness at the root of our coming to church. It is hard

to find that gladness at what is coming to us. We're afraid of what might be next, rather than rejoicing in the possibilities. We know too much to be glad.

Life used to be simpler, didn't it? Or is that my imagination? There does seem to be a longing to go back to a simpler time, to a greater time—a time when everything made sense. But did such a time ever really exist? Oh, there were times when I thought I had it all figured out; when things were easier for me. And no doubt, there were times that were easier for you. But was it easier for everyone? I remember when I felt like everything was pretty simple, but I didn't realize the anxiety that my parents were under to give me my simple life. And choices that I now question were made out of a fear of the moment and a desire to provide, and it made sense at the time.

Because our vision is limited. That seems to be our problem. We can't see well. We can't see what we need to see. We can't see God at work in the world, and we are left to muddle through with the best we can. And our best often isn't enough. What we see troubles us, limits us, divides us. What we see is what's in front of our faces, the problems to solve and the roadblocks to navigate. But what if we could see better, see farther? See more? See the Word at work?

When we read Isaiah 2:1-5, we usually skip to the prophecy, and rightly so. It is what is so compelling, what is so radical. The prophecy is what drives us this Advent season. We lean into those words so completely, so hopefully. Even though we doubt the reality of the words. It's a naive fantasy, we think, that there could be peace. All we see is war, conflict, and enemies. This makes a nice poster to hang in the kid's room, a pipe dream for those who don't know how the world works. A Christmas card, perhaps. But that's about as far as we will go.

But back up a moment. Before we tackle this image, this hope, let's take another look. In verse one, we are introduced to the prophet, "Isaiah, son of Amoz;" he has a family. And he works for the southern kingdom, Judah, and in its capital city, Jerusalem (which means, by the way, city of peace). Psalm 122 invites us to see Jerusalem as a city of peace, a city bound firmly together, a city of destination and fulfillment of the divine vision.

It seems almost ironic, doesn't it? Jerusalem, the city of peace, in one of the most contentious areas on the planet. How many temples were built and destroyed? How many walls were built, lines drawn? How many times have the alleys echoed

with soldiers' booted feet and streets washed in blood? It's not new, this conflict, this battleground in the city of peace. It's been a place of struggle for centuries.

And yet. Read verse one again: "The Word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." Did you catch it that time? The Word that Isaiah **saw**. Saw. Not heard, but saw. Oh, I know: those prophets, what are you going to do? They are a bit . . . goofy. Living out there on the edge, shouting at passersby, running for their lives, hiding in caves, and calling down fire. Yeah, those things did happen to prophets. They didn't have an easy life. Their main job was holding up mirrors, and no one likes looking too closely at themselves. So, no wonder they weren't included at the best parties; no wonder they got bounced from the best clubs. No one wanted them around—for long anyway.

Except, this was Isaiah. Not the normal, run-of-the-mill prophet. Not the backwoods, wild-eyed, messy-haired, bad teeth prophet of the street corners, holding up cardboard signs scrawled with illegible doom. Not Isaiah; he was as corporate as prophets get. And as much an insider as any of them. He had an office down the hall from the king's. He had a secretary who took his notes and typed them up for the press release. At least at first. At least before the whole house of cards fell.

Now, he didn't spout a party line; he wasn't a mouthpiece for the king. It's kind of amazing that he was able to keep his job as long as he did, given that more often than not he had bad news to share, fingers to point, doom to pronounce. Maybe those in power considered him a lightning rod. As long as he was there giving warnings and calling them to a higher standard, then nothing bad would actually happen. It makes you wonder if anyone listened to him. Or whether they just shook his hand each week and said, "Nice sermon, Pastor Isaiah," and went about their business. And he had to bite his tongue every now and then so as not to say, "Weren't you listening?" It was a messy time, here at the beginning of the book. And then it got worse. When doom fell; when the enemies swept through; when the country crashed around their ears, and they were left in burning rubble or carried away to a foreign land where they were sure even God had abandoned them.

That all is yet to come for Isaiah here in chapter two. Now it is palace intrigue; it is ringing the bell to call the powers-that-be back to the Power-That-Is. Now it is

warnings and worries and the day-to-day tedium of running a nation. And still, he manages to see something more. “The Word that Isaiah . . . saw.” What did he see? The mountain of the Lord’s house. An odd configuration, to be sure. But there it was rising above every other mountain, every other house. Not to lord it over, but to invite the world. The world. The whole world. Not to conquer, but to teach. To dispense wisdom. And what will be taught by God’s people? Peace. The end of war and that calamity that tears the very fabric of existence. The house of the Lord, the people of God, will teach peace. And farming, apparently. Well, if you aren’t going to kill them, you need to learn to feed them.

He could see all that. He could see the hope, the Word at work, even when the not-word was all around him. Even in the corridors of power that seemed hellbent on making things worse rather than better. Even as the people went merrily down the path that led them to destruction, Isaiah saw the Word. He saw another way, another hope. It seems to me that the call of Advent is not to proclaim doom, but to see hope, to see possibilities, even when no one else can see them. We are called to not give up on hope and to walk in the light of the Lord. Walk by the light we see in hope; move toward the kind of world God has in store; work for what makes for peace—even while we work to repair what is broken.

Maybe the gladness can return here as Advent begins to take over again. Maybe what we can remember is that we gather not for an empty ritual that doesn’t make any difference in the world or in our lives, not really. But what we go to the house of the Lord to do is to learn peace. And to learn how to live peace. And how to teach peace. We are being made into disciples – disciples who make disciples – of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That is the Advent proclamation. We’re transforming the world. The whole world.

We are gathering in the Lord’s house to restore our mission, to restore our hearts, to restore our gladness. I was glad; we were glad; let’s be glad up to restoration.

Second Sunday of Advent – Stand as a Signal

December 4, 2022

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#), [Romans 15:4-13](#), [Matthew 3:1-12](#)

Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

It is the second Sunday of Advent, and we're making a declaration. Whether we are heeding the call of John the Baptist to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" or longing for the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah, we are taking our stand for the promise that Jesus offers for beloved community, a new way of living. We are declaring and leaning into this kin-dom of heaven, living it now in all the ways we can.

So, how does our worship reflect our decision to live as though God's kingdom has come "on earth as it is in heaven"? By listening to our prayers. By telling our stories of service and witness and hospitality. By singing the songs that embrace this hope as a lived experience and that express our desire for the fulfillment to come. "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free." We are living in anticipation of that freedom for all people, not just for us.

We're beginning, here at the onset of December, to have a bifocal vision looking back to the incarnation and the glory of that first Christmas, but also looking ahead to the completion and the hope that the joy we experience in this season will not be a passing thing but our whole existence in eternity. This might be time for a creed or affirmation of faith that expresses our hope and confidence in the world that God is bringing to life around and within us.

For many congregations, it is also Communion Sunday and an opportunity to remember that the Christ we celebrate did not remain a baby in a manger, but grew to offer his life for ours, his body for our sustenance. Let our observance of the sacrament this time not be a solemn remembrance of death, but a joyous acceptance of the gift of life offered and shared. Let the openness of the Lord's Table be a signal to the hospitality of the whole fellowship of faith of which this congregation is a part.

PREACHING NOTES

Our house is . . . unsettled. Standard operating procedure, to be sure. But the animals seem especially uneasy. The dog and the cats all seem to be wanting something we can't quite figure out. Nick, the three-legged rescue terrier mix, thinks he's in charge of the world. As far as he can see, he is responsible for everything, every intruder real or imagined, every foot crossing into his line of sight; and woe be to any other dog that saunters past the house. At the same time, he is sharing a residence with two cats: Dora, the substantial cat; and Cato, short for Catastrophe, who does her level best to live up to her name. Cato doesn't care a whit about Nick's opinion and gallops through the house with abandon, upsetting the carefully maintained piles of things in strategic places, and even tries to cuddle up next to Nick, who looks at us like, "Can you do something about this?" Dora, on the other hand, though she is more than twice Cato's size, is a little more skittish. She slinks around, hoping the dog won't appear, and then skitters up the stairs when Nick comes exploding into the room.

My wife is convinced that if the cats would only give the dog a swat on the nose now and then, they could occupy the same space. I'm skeptical, given the demeanor with which the dog approaches anyone and everyone, sounding as though your liver just might be on the menu. But who knows? Maybe it is all a show. Maybe they really are friendly beasts and could live together in peace and harmony, holding paws and singing the animal version of kumbaya.

Yeah, right. Tell us about it, Isaiah.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

(Isaiah 11:6-9 NRSV)

Admit it, you thought it was the lion and lamb, didn't you? Not sure how that became the prototypical image of the peaceable kingdom. But Isaiah says it is the

wolf and the lamb and the lion and the calf. The fatted calf. The calf ready for eating. Impossible. Outrageous. Like Democrats getting along with Republicans. Won't happen. Freedom Partiers and Gun Control Advocates. Can't happen. Social conservatives and the live-and-let-live sort. Nah, unimaginable. Well, maybe if they were allowed to give each other a good swat first . . . No, no, bad idea. Our differences are too great, aren't they? Our divides too deep—until someone comes and points to a higher truth, a deeper reality, then all those things that separate us will continue to have us drawing up battle lines. It is the nature of the beast.

Isn't it? We are convinced it is. And yet there is a small glimmer of hope deep down within us that only dares show its face at this time of year. We dare entertain the idea that peace on earth is possible during Advent. And then quickly shake our heads and say it is kid's stuff. Like Charlie Brown and his poor excuse for a tree and the Grinch and his heart that grew three sizes one day—it is the stuff of cartoons and sappy seasonal specials. Only there does it really work out. Only there are the teeth not bared and claws sheathed. Only in our dreams and fantasies, not in our living rooms and boardrooms, not in the marketplace or on the battlefield. Not in the real world, where we live and move and have our being. Only in our holiday imagination.

Unless there are people willing to work and suffer for a different way of being in community; to stand as a signal to a better way. But who would want to do that? Who would sacrifice that much, endure that much to bring about a new world, a new peace?

A church I served on the south side of a large city annually held an event called Jubilee Christmas, and it was a monumental work of planning and giving. One year, twenty-one families were able to have Christmas for their children because of the generosity of a congregation of people who know what it is to be blessed to overflowing. I know what you're thinking: "Okay, so they gave Christmas gifts, big deal. A whole lot of people give Christmas gifts to the needy this time of year; it's a regular occurrence." The truth be told, Jubilee Christmas is like a lot of other giving programs and ministries at Christmastime. But when I watched this one unfold, it just seemed to feel a little different from other attempts at giving I had been a part of. Because it wasn't really about giving; it was more about sharing.

Yes, giving happened, and for a lot of those who helped make this event happen, their involvement was bringing in items to give away. But the Jubilee team and the hosts of the families were there to do something more than simply give. They wanted to share something significant; they wanted to offer an experience, not just a gift. They wanted to share the joy of Christmas, the warmth of Christmas, the love of Christmas. They wanted to share Emmanuel, God with us, in as tangible a way as they could. They wanted to welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed us, as Paul says in our Epistle text from Romans (*Romans 15:7*).

It's kind of complicated how it all happened, and I don't even know all the story, to be honest. It was a well-oiled machine, honed with hours and years of practice. But it never felt machine-like, nor did it feel patronizing in a way that mission work sometimes does. It felt real. It felt good. And here's the amazing part, barriers were crossed in this sharing. Barriers of language, of culture, of economic status; and just those we no longer know how to be neighbors with, the strangers next door barriers that trip us up all the time – none of that mattered. Because God has put on flesh and chosen to be born among us, so we don't have to live in fear of one another if we but take the risk of wanting to share, wanting to live in the peaceable kingdom.

When you hear those words – the peaceable kingdom – you think of a painting. A painting of animals clustered around a small child. The animals seem to be smiling, childish in their depiction, primitive, we call it. And in the background of the painting, there is a European man gathered with a group of Native Americans offering a hand of peace. That's the famous Quaker, William Penn, and the peace treaty he made with the original occupants of the land. The painter was Edward Hicks, a Quaker minister and painter. And it was his favorite subject. He painted over a hundred different takes on this image, and some sixty-plus still exist.

What historians have noted, however, was that there was a subtle change in the depiction of the animals in the paintings. In the older ones, they are kind and even playful as they lie together, predator and prey. But as time went on, the teeth grew sharper and the snarls more pronounced. Hicks was said to have begun to lose hope in humanity as he watched the barriers grow higher and stronger, the animosity grow deeper and more violent. In those later paintings, however, the child, the Christ, tightens his grip on the lion's mane and the bear's

neck, holding them in place with strength when their will was not with him. Hicks, though he began losing hope in the workings of the human community, began to cling even more tightly to Christ. In Christ, Hicks would put his hope.

Isaiah speaks of death, the stump of a nation, of a dream cut off, destroyed, ended. But not ended. Out of that death comes a sprig of life. Out of that dream denied comes a new dream, a new hope. That's what Advent reminds us—not that a festive season and a small celebration is returning once more because the calendar pages have turned; but that hope out of despair is possible, that life out of death is real, that a dream of a way of living that honors God and neighbor both is not only possible but is within reach. If we but set aside that which keeps us apart, those differences that make us suspicious of one another, and hold on to the common humanity that makes us so similar. That's why we love our neighbor as ourselves because they are ourselves, just like ourselves. They may sound different and look different and act different, but they are us. And we can learn to trust, even as we choose to be trustworthy.

When we love, when we welcome, when we share Emmanuel in our world today, then we will stand as a signal to the nations that there is a God among us and there is a way to know peace, and there is hope in the midst of despair; there is joy even in brokenness. We are called to stand as a signal. Advent is the reminder of that call and a reviver of that hope.

Third Sunday of Advent – The Lord’s Highway

December 11, 2022

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#), [Psalm 146:5-10](#)

Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

Joy Sunday says it all. The third Sunday of Advent is marked by the pink- or rose-colored candle in the wreath in many traditions. It is the one where we are reminded of the news that shall be a great joy to all people—the news that Emmanuel is born, God with us. And we stand in the promise even today, even here, in this place, in your place – God is with you. There can be no greater joy than that.

To help us, we have a psalm of joy and praise, 146. And we have a familiar and beautiful chapter from the prophet Isaiah who reminds us that we are on the way. We are traveling the Lord’s Highway today. We may not yet be all that we can be; we may not yet have reached our destination as the people of God, but we are on the way. We are a pilgrim people, singing our songs of ascent as we go up into the glorious presence of God, even as we are already embraced by our God every step of the way. So, let’s rejoice today. Let us claim the gift of joy, even in the struggles of a difficult world, even as we pray for those who are hurting, who are grieving, who are lost and alone. We celebrate; we are joyful because our God has promised healing and wholeness.

If we’ve held off the Christmas songs in favor of the promise of Advent, then today would be the day to break out “Joy to the World!” Today would be the day to sing “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates” about the one who is coming to dwell with us, to claim us and heal us and to send us. Let joy, which has been a part of this whole Advent series, now be the center stage, the dominant mood, as we gather.

There is also the journey, the highway Isaiah speaks of so wonderfully. How can we depict that road in our sanctuary today? What hints can we give of journeying, of the pilgrimage that marks our way through the life we have been given to live? We may not be coming forward for Communion this week, but can there be a procession of prayer or song? Can we make our way forward to pray before the Table of the Lord? Can we move this week, around the wreath, around the

sanctuary? We're on the way, and we celebrate that traveling as we worship. Going up to sing praise.

PREACHING NOTES

Last minute? You've heard advertisements for "last-minutes gifts" at the end of November. That didn't seem last minute, does it? Miles to go, really, weeks and weeks to get things accomplished. Sure, there are Christmas Eve services to plan, but we've got lots of time. Sure, there are gifts to get and decorations to put up, but there is time aplenty. Don't worry. Except now, we're two weeks out. The clock is ticking. Decisions are still to be made. There are questions to be answered and Jesus to be found.

Yeah, well, that's a story too. The Nativity set at a church I served was missing a vital ingredient. A central cast member of the drama of Christmas was missing. The central cast member. We looked everywhere, even contacted the previous pastor who kept it in his desk throughout the year for some reason. In my desk. But it wasn't there. And I was struck with the panic that in the transition I tossed it out. Him out. But, no, I wouldn't have done that, would I? Throw away a baby Jesus in the manger because it was in the wrong place? A desk drawer is an unexpected place. I mean, of all the places to keep a baby Jesus figurine, a desk drawer seems the least likely. The center drawer, the junk drawer, where you throw the stuff you don't know what to do with but don't want to throw away. The hidden stuff, the forgotten stuff, some broken, some given by someone, but you've forgotten who, knick-knacks, odd bits, the island of misfit toys, that's what's in the middle drawer of the desk. It's not a place for baby Jesus. A desert of stuff, some useful, some not, but unorganized and lost, just there, in the drawer.

But then is there any place where Jesus doesn't belong? The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was a great idea to keep the baby close to me all year long, in amidst the rubble of my life, until he can be brought out at Christmas time to say, "See, he's here! He's been here, all along. Right alongside, through the joys and the heartaches, through the struggles and the accomplishments." Right there, maybe out of sight for a time, but close by. Within reach. Even in the

desert. Even in a place of exile. Of uncertainty. Right there, all the time. Emmanuel.

Chapter 35 of Isaiah is considered a transitional chapter. Most scholars talk about three different Isaiahs—though they aren't named—all contained within the sixty-six chapters of the book that bears that name. And this chapter is a transition between First Isaiah and Second Isaiah. First Isaiah is largely about warning, trying to get God's people to see that their present course is going to lead to disaster, that the political relationships they have created will be their undoing, that their economic policies are unsustainable, that the road they are on will lead to destruction and exile. And Second Isaiah, written during that time of exile, is largely about hope and a promised return.

"Largely," because there is hope in First Isaiah, and there is warning in Second Isaiah. But in the middle section of the book, we are looking longingly for home; that much is clear. From about chapter forty on, there is this sense that all is not right, that we aren't where we are supposed to be, and we aren't who we are supposed to be. But overriding that sense of unease, there is a word that says it won't always be this way. This message, however, doesn't come in some vague, impersonal way. It comes with exuberant joy. It comes with lushness and excess. It comes with promise and security. It comes with applause.

The desert blooms and blossoms to usher us back home. The waters, normally such a temporary thing in that climate, will break forth, splashing up, pouring out, rising high, like the dancing waters at Disney World, like an open fire hydrant at on a hot summer day, like a cold bucket of Gatorade dumped on the winning coach. We're all winners on the road home. We are all celebrated on the journey to where we belong.

But do you see the promise? Not only is there a route home, but it is safe and secure, protected from all sorts of enemies; and it is well provisioned. There is water to quench our thirsts, and there is some sort of divine GPS. We simply can't get lost. And better than that, our aches and pains, our brokenness and infirmity will disappear on this journey. Our disabilities don't limit us, don't handicap us. We can dance and sing; we can see, and we can hear because this journey is one of beauty and of joy.

Best of all, however, is that we are not alone. This is not a solitary journey where we cross the miles and work our way into the preparations to face family who seem to both lift us up and knock us down at the same time. Not a “find your own way” and then the party starts once you get there. No, indeed.

First of all, God has come. That’s the reason for all the celebrations anyway. God has come to bring us home. God has come to escort us home. God has come to walk with us every step of the way. No wonder there is joy in our heads. No wonder sorry and sighing shall flee away. No wonder there is all the dancing and singing and splashing around in the courtyard fountains. John Wesley’s dying words were reported to be “best of all, God is with us.”

Best of all. But the second is like it. Isaiah tells us what we will do when we are on our way home, to this home of all homes, the home of our heart and soul, the home that will make us whole again for the first time. And what we do is share it. Say to those, “he tells us; ‘strengthen,’ he proclaims; ‘make firm,’” he encourages us. He isn’t talking to God here; he is talking to us. And he isn’t telling us to strengthen our own weak hands or to make firm our own feeble knees, though God knows they are feeble and in need of strengthening. God knows our hearts are fearful even at the best of times, it seems. We are hardly the best ambassadors of God’s grace and hope, hardly the best witnesses to comfort and joy. And we are what God has to work with. We are the sign that the journey home has begun. We are witnesses to God with us - to Emmanuel. We are the light in the darkness, announcing to any and all that the season of joy and light, of peace and goodwill, is here. Say to those of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not.”

He’s right there. God’s right there, as we walk on the road through the desert that might not yet be blooming. The seeds are there, hidden away, behind the paper clips and the rubber bands, covered up by the stacks of Post-it notes that you couldn’t use in a lifetime, the business cards, the note that someone scrawled on the back of the bulletin telling you what a poor excuse for a human being you are and then didn’t sign it just to mess with your head, underneath the drawing a bored child did of you up there in front, with your head too big and your hands swollen to an incredible size, and a word bubble coming out of your mouth saying “Jesus loves you!” Yeah, he’s there. Emmanuel. God-with-us. Even in the desert. On the Lord’s highway.

That is why we're on this road, this Christmas road, this desert road of ritual and celebration, this sand dance as we shuffle along this highway of hope and peace and joy. *Gaudate*, the third week of Advent, *gaudate* – Latin for joy. More than joy, it is "Rejoice!" A command, an imperative. You must, we should, you will rejoice as we walk this road, as we make this journey. It is the rhythm of the road.

Psalm 146 becomes our declaration. *Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.* That's how the psalm begins. But we pick up the tune in verse 5, happy are those . . . Forget your troubles, come on get happy. We're singing on this road; we're marching to Zion; we're heading to the Promised Land, to the kin-dom of God. Of course, we rejoice. Of course, we sing. Of course. The Lord's highway is a road for singing. We're on the way.

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Give You a Sign

December 18, 2022

[Isaiah 7:10-16](#), [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Color: Purple, Blue

PLANNING NOTES

This is odd, isn't it? The last Sunday of Advent, yet there is a whole week until Christmas. May this extra time allow us a little breathing space to listen to Isaiah and to Matthew before we rush off to the exuberance and extravagance of Christmas. Isaiah issues an invitation to participate in the workings of the God who redeems us, an invitation that Ahaz refuses, to his sorrow. How do we refuse to participate in what God continues to do among us or around us? How are we missing the signs that God is at work even today?

Worship could be about sharing God sightings even in this season where the material seems to have the upper hand. What stories could we tell about how our breath was taken away by the beauty around us, by an act of kindness or forgiveness from a friend or even stranger? What images could we share of our surrounding community, images that speak of a longing for God, images of children at play, of lovers embracing, of reunions that overwhelm us?

Or maybe Matthew could help us claim and name the Christ who is born among us. We may have a bumper sticker declaring that "Jesus is the reason for the season," but how are we bringing that to life? How are we acting like Jesus, like we believe that Jesus is indeed the reason? A neighborhood invitation to join you for Christmas Eve services is a start, but what else can you do to name the Christ who sends you, who transforms you, who makes you into the disciples that you are?

This is worship on the brink, leaning forward into what is coming, celebrating what is here, and inviting all to join us as we watch and actively wait. How do we envision the kingdom of God? How do we live into the kin-dom of beloved community? In other words, today might be a time to share what we really want for Christmas! And what are the signs that sustain us while we wait? There are signs of God's working all around. Let's see them and name them for us and for the world.

PREACHING NOTES

A family I knew when I served in the British Methodist Church many years ago told me this story. It seems the youngest daughter, Trudy, came home from school with the announcement that she had a part in the upcoming Nativity play and she was so proud. The problem was, she couldn't remember which she had. She knew it started with a "B." Her family spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out what that part might be, but finally had to admit that they were stumped. At least until they arrived at the school for the performance and discovered that Trudy was a "bystander."

I've often wondered if that meant she played Joseph. Certainly, in Luke's version of the Christmas story, Joseph has a less than starring role. He hardly appears at all, except when it is his name that gets them shipped off to Bethlehem by Rome's goofy decree. Then later, when they come to Jerusalem for what many assume to be the Bar Mitzvah, Joseph appears as another bystander while Mary does all the scolding. Oh, she does include him when she says, "Your father and I," but that seems to be a plot device that allows the boy Jesus to make a statement about his true origins. "Did you not know I must be in my father's house?"

Poor Joseph. We don't know what happens to him, but he disappears quickly from the stories. Legends have grown up around him, as they always do. But nothing definitive has appeared to let us know that he was more than a bystander to Christmas.

Okay, in Matthew's version Joseph is more than a bystander; he has a central role. It is Mary who gets short shrift in the story. Yet, even here, it all seems to be happening to Joseph. He is a responder, not a producer. I believe that is why Joseph doesn't figure into our stories all that often. We want to be in control of our lives; we want to take charge.

At least that is what the world around us tells us. That is why the shelves of our bookstores and maybe even our homes are filled with "self-help" titles. We want to map the direction; we want to hold the reins of our lives. We get frustrated when things happen to us that are beyond our control. And when you think about it, things always happen to us that are beyond our control. Always.

Too often, we feel like bystanders in our own lives, let alone in the whirlwind that is Christmas. We had plans. What happened to them? Well, life happened to them; life happened to us. Everything has gone out of control; everything slips from our fingers. We feel helpless and put upon, watching the world go by at times.

That is just when we need Joseph. Things were happening to Joseph, no argument there. His plans were out of control— out of *his* control. Something or someone else had taken charge of his life. So, now what? Well, he had a choice. That's the thing that we often forget at times like this. That is the perspective that we can lose sight of when life gets overwhelming. There is still a choice to be made. We still have input to give.

Joseph had to decide what he was going to do when life happened to him. He thought about it and decided that he would do the kindest thing he could think of. He would divorce Mary quietly. Jewish law gave him a range of options in cases like this one. He was allowed to consider how to punish Mary for this breach of the covenant. He could have had her publicly humiliated to restore his status since he was the wronged person in this relationship. He could have had her stoned to death or driven from the community. He chose the lightest of the options open to him; he was simply going to set her aside. The covenant was already broken; the marriage that was legalized, if not yet celebrated and consummated, was over. It is best to just get out. He was, as Matthew tells us, a righteous man.

Righteousness is a great biblical concept. In our minds, it means pious, or holy, or a do-gooder. It has taken on a level of meaning that makes it impossible for most of us to comprehend, let alone live out. In many of our minds, it is now half a word – he's a righteous _____. You fill in the blank.

But in the Bible, righteousness is the highest of concepts. In fact, in various places, it is used as a descriptor for God. The Bible even goes on to say that no one but God is righteous. Except Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man.

Righteousness simply means being faithful to our covenants. When we keep our promises, when we fulfill the law, when we are obedient, we are righteous. The story of the Bible is the story of the keeping and the breaking of covenants.

Joseph was a keeper of the covenant. What he needed was other options. And God gave them to him in a dream.

Did you notice that Luke says that Mary got an angel in her living room? Matthew says Joseph got a dream. I don't know about you, but an angel in the living room seems more convincing than a dream that might have been the result of a stressful night and not eating right. How was he to know that this wasn't an upset stomach or traffic noise? How does he know this is God speaking and not him grasping at straws?

How did he know? Because he was a righteous man. Here was a way he could keep the covenant that he had made. Here was a way he could honor the commitment and honor the woman that he had come to love in this process. I know that marriage was a different sort of phenomenon in that world. And that our romantic notions of love and marriage don't really fit in that cultural mindset. Yet, it seems to me that if there were no emotional connection here, the choice would have been easier for Joseph. The kindness he shows in his first choice would be unusual. The acceptance of a wild possibility coming from a dream seems almost unthinkable unless he could see the big picture.

The child that is conceived in her **IS** of the Holy Spirit. What an amazing act of faith for Joseph to wake up and not shake his head at the outrageousness of that claim. What was real, what was more earthly, more concrete was the betrothal, signed, sealed, and almost delivered. What would Joseph have to endure to accept this incredible, world-changing notion that somehow God had chosen Mary, his Mary. to be the vessel, the portal into our world?

That's another thing we don't know. We don't get the juicy details of what happened in between the nighttime visitation from an angel of the Lord and the flesh and blood infant born to Mary and named by Joseph. We don't know what happened to them, or in them.

But here is something to consider in this story, or at least in the blending of the two stories. According to Luke, Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem because that is where Joseph is from. His family is there. And yet, no one would take them in. Taking care of your family is high on the list of the responsibilities of hospitality for this culture. But there was no room for them in the inn. And an inn was not a Motel 6, where they would keep the light on for you. An inn was usually a family

home that had an extra room or two for travelers or for family. For family. That innkeeper that we portray in our Christmas pageants might not have been a businessman, but a member of Joseph's family. A family member who shut the door in Joseph's face and sent him and his suspiciously pregnant wife out into the dark, cold night.

Our choices are not always easy to make or to keep. The consequences are sometimes painful, but there are always choices. We need not be bystanders to our own lives. We can, like Joseph, make the hard choice to believe that God is at work, that God is present, even in the most troubling of situations. We can choose to be obedient to the call to commit ourselves to follow, to commit ourselves to honor, to commit ourselves to keep our covenants, even when it becomes difficult to do so.

In the end, the role that Joseph played in this story was to name the child—a significant part in the drama. You could say that Joseph played the part of the sign. Or maybe became a sign to the sign that was the baby in the manger. But because he chose to enter into the drama, to be more than a bystander to the story, he becomes a sign for anyone with eyes to see that God is at work in the world.

Signs are messy business. Just ask Ahaz. Isaiah tells us King Ahaz was invited into the story as well. Ask a sign of the Lord (Isaiah 7:11.) Or maybe it was "become a sign of the Lord," not because that's what the text says, but because that is what would happen. When you start messing around with signs, when you start seeing God at work around you or even in you, things happen; and you lose control – as Joseph discovered. No wonder Ahaz doesn't want anything to do with this sign business. Oh, he tries to pass it off as being humble, "I won't put the Lord to the test" (v. 12). What he really meant was, "Keep me out of this." What he meant was, "I'm content where I am; I'm in power; don't threaten the status quo." Because that is what God tends to do when showing up. Things get turned upside down or inside out, and Ahaz wanted nothing to do with that. Unfortunately, God was not to be deterred. You don't want a sign, well, you're getting one anyway. Here it is.

We can argue what Isaiah was referring to in chapter 7, whether it was something immediate to challenge the security of Ahaz on the throne or something distant

like a child being born and left in a manger. Maybe both. But it was a sign. Signs of God's activity in the world are around us. We need eyes to see them and the faith to look for them. But Joseph would tell us that it takes even more to be one, to be a sign of God's action in the world. He became one for us when he decided to go all in on this crazy, world-upsetting drama and then to name the presence among them. It is a role he chose to play.

But one that we can play too. When we name Christ as the reason for our choices to love and to honor and to serve, then we, like Joseph, have moved from being a bystander to an actor, a co-creator with God, the theologians call it. We, at the direction of God, call things into being. Things like family, things like hope, things like peace. It is within us to name these things into being. It is within us to be obedient to the vision of the kingdom that God has given us, and we dream into reality by the choices we make every day.

There are two names for the child that are given in this passage. The most common one, of course, is Jesus. This name comes from the Hebrew, *Yeshua* (sometimes written as Joshua) and translates as "God saves." This is the name that appears throughout the rest of the gospel. But the other name, which appears only here, is Emmanuel – God with us.

We love that name and ought to remember it more than just at Christmas time. The name itself is a sign. We certainly ought to remember it when it comes to making choices about how we respond to what happens to us and around us. We are not alone. We are not simply bystanders to our own lives. And maybe we ought to pay more attention to our dreams—the waking ones and the sleeping ones. Who knows, an angel may be talking to us.