

## Fourth Sunday of Advent-December 18, 2022

**Isaiah 7:10-11** Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, **11** Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. **12** But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. **13** Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? **14** 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. **15** He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. **16** 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.

**Matthew 1:18-25.** *18* 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. *19* Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. *20* 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. *21* She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” *22* All 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.” *24* When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, *25* but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## SERMON

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This time of year we think we're supposed to be unflinching in our cheer even when grief and the reality that some things just aren't right intrudes on us. Let's be honest. Keeping faith all the time isn't easy. We struggle to see God's fingerprints on what's happening in the world. We start thinking it's all up to us and we're on our own. We might even think keeping the faith is a DIY proposition.

The Good News is that we're not alone. We have each other. What's more God is with us.

Faith is that mixed and messy response we have to God's promise to be with us always. It might be encouraging to recall that faith is a process. Dr. James Fowler likes to describe our lives as "*faith-ing*" in his book "Faith is a Verb" It's such *faith-ing* that we all do personally AND in community.

Centuries before Dr. Fowler published his book, Martin Luther also spoke of *faith-ing* differentiating it from faith as an object we keep in the china cabinet or the safe deposit box.

King Ahaz's *faith-ing* doesn't go well. God makes Israel's King Ahaz an unprecedented offer for a sign, any sign he chooses. Ahaz dismisses it because he has already hedged his bets and plans to give his sure-enough pledge of allegiance to a more powerful king. Let's just say Ahaz' plan backfires.

Fast forward some 800 years. There's this simple carpenter-a stand up guy by all accounts. Joseph is clearly in way over his head. Joseph struggles with doing right by his pregnant fiancée and respecting the cultural and religious standards of his day. Joseph might also feel isolated and want to take responsibility for everything. Even though we never read anything

Joseph says out loud, we learn Joseph has a plan. Joseph decides to spare his family and community a public scandal by privately annulling his and Mary's engagement. Yet, as the rabbis like to say, "We plan and God laughs." Or in this case God self-discloses by appearing to Joseph in dreams.

*"Change of plan, Joseph—Forget the annulment. Go ahead with the marriage."* The baby Mary is carrying fulfills the prophet's vision of one who comes to liberate. In the dream, Joseph hears the name "Emmanuel"—God is with us. Joseph hears another name too. When Joseph and Mary publicly announce the name of the child Jesus, they proclaim liberation from our sin. Jesus saves us precisely by being God-with-us.

Think way back to the story of Eve and Adam. When their DIY project unravels, they're overcome with shame and they believe they can—or maybe—must hide from God. Sometimes we too think we have to go it alone and when things break apart, we're feel ashamed and we think God has abandoned us.

Same pattern with King Ahaz...taking the weight of the world on himself, he's willing to sell out to keep the invaders at bay.

Now consider Joseph— God reveals to him that the baby born to Mary will liberate us by being God with us...saving us from our reflex to live as if we're alone and it's all up to us. In religious and Biblical language, clinging to such illusion is the 'sin' God seeks to save us from.

The Good News is that God's faithfulness is the constant even when we think our faith is weak or little ...mustard seed size perhaps. God-with-us is the fixed point in a world that sometimes seems to spin in wobbly and whopper jawed ways.

So here we are together...hearing scripture, sharing bread and wine, loving our neighbour and bearing witness to God's faithfulness because God knows how hard keeping the faith can be. And in all of this...God **is** with us. Amen.