*Sermon Text for December 22, 2013*

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Matthew 1:18-25, Isaiah 7:10-16

“Knowing that God is with us”

Our final sign, our final image that we are able to see comes to us in a very simple, non-complicated fashion. It is a manger with hay, almost waiting for a child to be placed in it. But we are only in our 4th Sunday in Advent so the baby is not placed just yet. The other signs were a bit more complicated than this one to pull off. The big heavy plow, and the stump with a shoot that we had to manufacture. The people power and the risk of life to make the river flowing out of the desert last week. This week it is simple, but no less meaningful.

Last Friday we won by a lot. It was a great game because we have 13 girls and at least 4 or 5 of them don’t get to play in most games. And the very last girl on the bench, she got to play in the 3rd quarter and I said okay, go in for Bethany, and I went back to coaching. Well, instead of checking in at the table, waiting to be allowed in at a dead ball she just jumped in there and started playing so it was 6 vs. 5 for us for brief period of time before I called time out to remedy that problem before we were called for a technical foul.

There are some things that you think are simple enough that they don’t have to be explained, and this last image is the simplest that we have had so far. But an explanation is still needed. Our previous words that we saw spoke to the coming of peace, the coming of a new people, a new way of life. Today we see the coming of Emmanuel, or as the angel tells Joseph, the coming of Jesus.

We can easily just rush forward and try to get involved in the game right away, without stopping and checking in and trying to understand the sign that God gives to us, and we can miss then if we aren’t looking for them, or if we don’t want to see them, or if we are so intent upon a God who is created by us, a God who is with us and only us. Let’s read.

**READ**

Our Isaiah Scriptures begin in a very unique way. It tells us that God spoke to king Ahaz. Now up to now and all the chapters that follow we see the prophet speaking to the king. It’s no big deal except that it serves as a beginning reminder that we have to be open to hearing the word of God not only through those around us but from God himself.

God says king, ask for a sign, any sign at all can do. It can be as big as you like and as powerful as you like. Go ahead. Well, God, the king responds, I’d like to but you know your Holy Word, it says that we should not tempt you, we should not put you to the test. And God, through Isaiah answers, look at vs.13, well done and well said Ahaz, you are righteous in your answer. You know your Bible well. No, that isn’t at all what he says is it?

Martin Luther once said: hypocrites, when it is not necessary are religious (like on a football field, or around a flag pole, or in public trying to prove something or defend some nebulous principle), on the other hand when they ought to be humble, they are the most haughty (when they are in power, when they can have their own way at the expense of others). The king didn’t need God to give him a sign, he had this, he was in charge and got it all under control. Why do we need to seek out God when things are going well? He only comes in handy when I need him, you know, crisis mode.

Pursuing God’s command is not putting him to the test. If God tells you to ask for a sign, well then you should ask for a sign. If God puts you in a position where you are able to do something for his kingdom then you should do it. But it isn’t that easy all the time is it?

You see Ahaz didn’t ask for a sign because he was afraid. He was a coward. Knowing that God is with us, all the time, takes a lot of courage. Because that means that God is with us all the time, all the time. So asking for a sign means that we are not only okay, but yearn from the presence of God in all times of our lives.

You see a sign is an assurance of God’s presence. It underscores God’s intention to do as he had promised. IF we are not ready to turn things around and focus upon that which God wants us to do then there is no way, like King Ahaz, that we are going to ask for a sign.

In fact, God chastises Ahaz by saying, you’re making me tired and you are making everyone around you tired. So I’m going to send you a sign. You can almost hear Ahaz rubbing his hands together ready for what comes next because God is going to send him a really good sign.

Have you ever received a sign from God? You better say yes because that is what we have been doing over these last weeks is visualizing the signs that God is giving to us in His Holy Bible. But if you said no, I’ve never seen a sign from God, or if you are like Ahaz and just haven’t paid attention to God’s signs, well, you’re in good company. The Bible is full of heroes who received a sign but didn’t get it at first. Jonah, Elijah who waited in the cave expecting God is going to come either in the earthquake, or the wind, or the fire. But in fact God sent a still small voice.

Or Sara and Abraham who had received God’s promises of his family being more than the multitude of stars that you can see in the heavens, and that the sign for that was that 99 year old Sarah would have a baby. She laughed about that, didn’t she? Or maybe she was laughing not because she was 99 but because Abraham was 99 and well, things aren’t as easy as they used to be.

Either way Ahaz is waiting for this amazing sign and getting ready to reap the benefits when Isaiah says, a young girl is going to have a baby. That’s it? That happens all the time. What’s so special about that? Not exactly what I had in mind God. I was thinking more along the lines of a foreign king coming and offering me riches, or maybe a military victory by my army, something with a little more backbone would be nice right around now.

It is a simple sign, a baby being born. But it is not so much the baby being born that is the sign as much as the name that is given to that baby. Emmanuel, a reminder that God is with us. God’s sign of a child surprised both a king and an unwed father named Joseph. Like the king he is told not only to stay with Mary but to name the baby. The king was to call him Emmanuel, God with us, Joseph was to call him Jesus, God saves, as a fulfilment of this prophecy that God is with us. To complete the promise of Scripture.

When we live our lives it is easier dictating to God whether we need a sign or not. That way we can have God with us when we want. In Russia some of the clients of our Soup Kitchen had been children during WWII and after a ferocious battle there were Nazi Germany soliders lying in a field dead and dying. He was responsible for taking off their belts and gathering them up so that they could sell them and get money for food. Not a very pleasant task. But he told me, with a bewildered look, Pastor, and would you believe, that on the back side of each of the belts were the word: “Gott mitt unz”. God with us. If God was with them, then how could he have been with us?

Unless we see the sign of the child it is all too easy to turn “Immanueal, God with us”, into a call to defeat our enemies. As Isaiah states, we can weary our God with our approach to God as if he is only with us. The belt buckle on the Nazis is no different from Presbyterians who wouldn’t want to inhabit a heaven with terrorists. That’s Ahaz’ approach. I’m king, I’m set, I’ll ask for God when I need him, but he is with me after all.

When we see a heaven divided by the good and bad in a hierarchy then we forget that the shepherds and the kings both adored Jesus on bended knee. God with us needs to remind us this Advent season that Jesus, God saves, is Savior for all. We can’t choose whom Jesus will take with him. If we profess Jesus as Lord and Savior then we will be with him as well as those who profess him as Savior who might think differently than we do about a whole host of issues.

I wasn’t going to say much about the defrocking of the Methodist pastor who celebrated his gay son’s wedding. The church did what was right and what needed to be done. He simply could not abide by the rules of the church and so needed to leave the church.

But I would hate for this to be a confirmation for those who think that only straight heterosexuals will be in heaven. I’m sorry, but that is not what God with us means. It means that we will be spending all of eternity with God, and with murderers like the Apostle Paul, and with those who committed incest like Noah and his daughters, with the prideful and people of all races, and with those who say that they are gay. Heaven is going to be full of sinners just like us, some worse than us in this world and some better than us.

It is really the most simple messages that we often confuse or complicate. This whole passage is a promise of restoration that is coming which will clearly reflect God is with us because of the safety and the prosperity that will be a part of that reality. Sometimes that statement, God with us, is so simple that it is threatening because we realize he is not only with us, but he is truly with all of us. I pray that is exciting for you to hear.

Amen.