

Sermon Text for December 22, 2019

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

“Not the kind of Baby That You Would Expect.”

Welcome to this refuge, a sanctuary where we sit on either side of the aisle and we are focused together on worshipping a king who brings peace, who intervenes in our lives so that all things work together for good. This is our last Sunday in Advent and if you are just starting the journey today with us through Advent here is what you have missed. On the last Sunday of the church calendar year, which took place on the last Sunday in November, we celebrated a kingdom that we would not expect. This kingdom is highlighted by an emphasis by those living in the kingdom, that is us, of focusing on reaching out to the Matthew 25 community, those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, without clothes, the sick, and those in prison.

We saw our first week of Advent a second coming that we would not expect. In a similar vein we all believe that Jesus is coming back, but when he comes back it will be in a way that completely surprises us. We expect a second coming that vanquishes and overcomes but we read that it is one where all will be brought before Jesus and declared righteous. The second coming of Christ demands action on our part that is consistent with what he desires, again a reference back to Matthew 25. Our second week of Advent we saw a Jesus that we would not expect. Jesus, we often think, will be with us as a gentle shepherd when we are reunited with him. Actually Scripture portrays him coming as someone who will separate the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the chaff. There will be judgment and there will be celebration and mourning. All of this, we read, is intermingled with the question of what have we done for the least of these?

The third week of Advent, and then you are caught up if you are new worshipping with us, focused on a Messiah that we would not expect. Our Messiah was expected to be a righteous soldier who brought about his kingdom by force, who brought about his kingdom through any means possible. We find instead a Messiah who heals and brings good news to the poor. We relegate those tasks to the preachers of today, we relegate those good works to those who are called and commissioned to do that. Scripture tells us that it is our Messiah who will come and instill his kingdom, not the kind of kingdom that we have in our midst, and that kingdom will be focused on healing and provisioning before anything else.

So now today we find a baby like you would not expect. In fact, this Scripture I often wonder why it is in the lectionary at all because during Advent the baby is supposed to stay on the sideline, hidden in a drawer until Christmas Even when we bring Him out and place him carefully in the manger. But Matthew kind of jumps the gun on us, we read today the nativity story of Jesus, the birth story of Jesus, even before, it seems, we are ready.

But what we find is a baby that we would not expect. It is a baby who in the midst of chaos and confusion is able to bring about peace and unity and common purpose. It is a baby who demands that we be different from those around us who are so caught up in attempts to divide and shut down those who may think and look and act differently from us. But we here in these walls, are united and excited about the future together and it is exactly that baby who allows us to be in the state in which we find ourselves. Let's read.

READ

We find in Scripture a long line of stories about babies who are born in ways that you would not expect and to people that you would not expect. We find babies born to mothers who biologically should not be having babies, or could not have babies. We find Sarah at almost 100 years old, we find Hannah, Samuel's mom, who promises to leave her baby with the Lord if God blesses her with a baby, we find two babies struggling and fighting in the womb, we find a baby Moses born in a time when he wasn't supposed to be born, at least according to the Egyptian laws, and God uses him in a way that was planned even before he was conceived.

These babies in the OT, and John the Baptist in the NT, are born with specific roles and with specific meanings that were meant not just for the parents, but for the entire nation, for all the people. That is certainly the case in Isaiah, let's turn there now, where we read that this baby who is to be born, is born with a specific meaning that the king of Israel was to understand. First of all, what is happening in Israel at this time? It was a mess. The Assyrians were influencing the Israelites and about to take them in captivity and the king doesn't know what to do. The current reality in Israel was one where the role of God was not understood, to the point where God's presence was relegated to the priests and not to the people or the leaders.

But this baby, Isaiah tells the king, will serve as a sign that God does and will intervene in your current reality and that those Assyrians and all of your enemies will be defeated whether you expect it or not. In Isaiah the baby isn't tasked with any important future responsibilities, but rather just had to be born and be given a name. This name, Immanuel, would signify to all

that we aren't in this alone. It would signify to all that God is with us, even in the midst of the most mundane, confusing, dividing time in our nation's history. Do you hear me America? God is with us.

This baby requires us to recognize that God does intervene in the midst of our lives. Isaiah lays out for us a birth of a baby by a young girl and no other special feature, no other important details. In fact, this baby in Isaiah is a baby like any other, born like any other, and the kind that we would expect. But then we get to the New Testament.

Turn to Matthew with me if you would. We get to this Scripture and it follows a very normal depiction of who Jesus is in the midst of a genealogy that takes us through Joseph who is very clearly in the line of David, and who is very clearly the Messiah that we were all waiting for. That is how our verse begin as they describe the beginning, he genetio, of Jesus. It begins just like Genesis begins, it begins just like John 1 begins, in the beginning, as if the birth of Jesus is the beginning of a new creation. Which it is.

But what we find is a depiction of parents that we would not necessarily expect. The minimum age for marriage in Jesus' day was 12 for girls and 13 for boys, which is why Mary is consistently depicted as a little girl, probably because she was. One of my favorite stories of this time of year is when my dad was a pastor at his church and they had a lot of young families and the child who was the angel Gabriel had practiced his lines: Hail Mary, favored of all women, behold, you are with child. He had them down. The kids came out and the play was going on until the angel Gabriel's turn came and he completely blanked, he knew the sense of what he was supposed to say, but not exactly the words so he mustered up his courage, pointed to Mary and said: Zap, you're pregnant.

This is not what we expect, and certainly Joseph did not expect to be visited by an angel in a dream after he finds out that his fiancé is pregnant. Let me read you the words of Deuteronomy 22:23-24. This is what should have happened, but Joseph had already made up his mind to save his fiancé's life. But notice what we don't have in this Scripture..., no census, no journey to Bethlehem, no shunning at the inn, no manger, no nothing, just two teenagers wondering what to do visited by God who tells them that their baby is going to be something special. What we find in Matthew is a common story in the life of a young couple. A woman, a man, a baby on its way, people facing difficult decisions in regard to religious traditions, laws, community, marriage, family, divorce. All the arenas of common life.

But what we also notice is that Matthew is much less interested in the story of the actual birth than he is in the identity of the one being born. Unlike the baby born in Isaiah, this Immanuel, who was born as a sign to those around that God intervenes and God is in control, just a message to those around, this baby is tasked with a responsibility that you would not expect from the time that he was born. His name reflects his future role, just like Emmanuel's name reflected a reminder that God would be in our midst. The name that we find in this New Testament Scripture reminds us why this baby was born: Look at vs.21 "She will bear a son, you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

God becoming flesh and living among us matters not as a symbolic presence, but as God intervening in our lives at all times. John 1:14 – The Word became flesh and dwelt among us was for a specific purpose, not just to bring us good cheer, but to forgive us from our sins. The way in which God came to earth, through a virgin birth conceived by the Holy Spirit, made all the difference in the personal lives of Mary and Joseph and makes all the difference in the struggling existence in which humanity finds itself. Twice we read that the Holy Spirit had intervened directly in the lives of this couple.

It is here that we recognize that God is the supreme actor in drama of salvation by sending us a Savior. Not Joseph, not Mary, but God, or as we see here Jesus conceived by God incarnate is the primary actor. But while God is the primary actor, we are never told to be passive. We must be active. We are given a little Too Much Information in vs.25 but that is for the purpose to ensure that the reader understands that there is no way that Joseph is the biological father, even though he becomes the father by naming him Jesus. This has nothing to do with the perpetual virginity of Mary because we know that she had other children and the Greek in this verse describes Jesus as the firstborn.

Jesus was born to be our Savior, to save us from our sin. That was his role. What is the church's role in society today as a result of Jesus' birth, as a result of this baby that we would not expect? A way to answer that question is to ask another question. Who would miss us in Strasburg and beyond if we did not exist. I am very glad to say that if we asked that question we could come up with a long list of people both locally and internationally that would miss us and whose lives would be diminished if we were not around.

As the church we have to represent an Immanuel that few may ever experience in their lives. The birth of Jesus signals to us that transformation is underway and that this community

can remain faithful even in the face of conflict and chaos because all that is taking place is under the providence of God. Emmanuel depicts the assurance that the community can live through the anxiety of transition because they believe that it comes from God. Transition can be tolerated if we know that it comes from God.

So the question we must ask ourselves today is can we be as sign of Emmanuel, God with us, just as Jesus was? That is our charge, to reflect the message and the sign that the Christ child, a baby that you would not expect, represented.