

“Emmanuel”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 22, 2013**

Old Testament Lesson – Isaiah 7:10-16 New Testament Lesson – Matthew 1:18-25

Two Americans were invited by the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics in their prisons, at their businesses, fire and police departments, and even at a large orphanage. They were also told they could teach from the perspective of their faith.

At the orphanage there were about 100 boys and girls, children who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program. When the holiday season approached, the Americans were excited that the orphans would hear – for the first time ever – the story of Christmas.

“We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem, finding no room in the inn, and instead giving birth to the baby Jesus in a manger. Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened.”

After the story, each child was given three small pieces of cardboard to make a manger, along with a piece of yellow napkin that they shredded into straw and laid in the manger. An old, worn-out flannel nightgown was cut into small squares for the baby’s blanket. And from tan felt, which was brought from the United States, the children cut out a doll-like baby.

The two Americans walked among them as the orphans busily assembled their mangers. “All went well,” said one of the Americans, “until I got to the table where little Misha sat – he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project.” “As I looked at the little boy’s creation, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the boy why there were two babies in the manger.” Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had heard the Christmas story only once, he related the happenings accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. “Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, ‘And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay.’ ‘I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don’t have any place to stay.’ ‘Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn’t, because I didn’t have a gift to give him like everybody else did. ‘But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.’ ‘So I asked Jesus, “If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?” ‘And Jesus told me, “If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.”

‘So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him – for always.’ “As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him – for always.”¹

We call Jesus by the name Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” In this Advent season, we discover like the orphan Misha, that the God who came to us in Jesus Christ will never abandon or abuse us, but will stay with us – always. And yet, sometimes we do feel abandoned by God. Sometimes we feel abused, and we blame God, or at least we ask in despair how God could let bad things happen.

In our Old Testament Lesson today, Ahaz the king of Judah is feeling abandoned and abused. There are two other kings ganging up on him, and he’s freaking out, so much so that all the people of Judah are shaking like leaves on a tree. So Isaiah says, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz says, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” By not looking to God in his time of distress, Ahaz has given us a sign, the sign of his lack of faith. He refuses to accept the reassurance from the Lord.

Don’t we do that? When the biopsy comes back positive for cancer, we feel lost and abandoned and there’s nothing anybody can say to us to give us hope. When the final exam is marked with an “F,” rather than an “A,” same thing: despair, hopelessness.

Maybe it’s your spouse stomping out the door, or your dream of success once again being downsized and diminished, or the late-night call that communicates a death not a birth, or particularly this time of year for many people, there’s the desire for companionship which is too often met with another lonely holiday.

And yet, in all these troubling, discouraging, and disastrous situations, God assures us that the Lord is with us, as Immanuel. As long as there are two babies in the manger – us alongside the Lord – we are never completely without companionship or support.

As long as we are willing to accept Christ in our lives, we can be assured that God will see us through. And all we have to do to receive this reassurance is to look for the signs – God’s signs of love and compassion, of provision and protection. If we don’t get regular signs from God that we are not alone – in whatever trouble may come our way – if we don’t feel and embrace the reassurance of Emmanuel, God with us, it’s because we are looking in the wrong places.

King Ahaz refuses to receive a sign of reassurance from the Lord, and elsewhere in scripture we see why. In 2nd Kings 16, we see that rather than turn to God for support and assurance, Ahaz has already decided to deal with the threat of invasion on his own. Or more precisely, by turning to and trusting in an alliance with the Assyrian King.

¹ Author unknown; retrieved from <http://www.homileticsonline.com>.

Not only did he turn to someone other than God for help, he actually used silver and gold from the temple to pay off the Assyrians, and even erected an Assyrian altar in the temple.

Ahaz refuses the assurance of the Lord when it's offered to him because Ahaz has already turned his back on God. It didn't matter what kind of sign God might send, he wouldn't have seen it. Ahaz had stopped looking to the Lord in his time of trouble.

Who do we look to in times of trouble? I know for me, I've got a history of turning to food for comfort – probably learned it during my childhood. And even today, when things get stressful, it's hard for me to turn to prayer, or to the support system God has raised up in my life, or to scripture, or even just turn to a healthier diversion. More often than not I do it, but it's hard; just like it is for anyone else. I mean, we are only human, after all, so we need to really work at turning to God in times of trouble.

And yet when life gets stressful, too often and too easily people find themselves turning to food, or for some, maybe it's drinking, or sex, or TV; shopping, gossip, finger-pointing, or pity parties; or any of the other kinds of unhealthy and unproductive stuff that we turn to. That's our tendency, as human beings. But it's not our destiny. Our destiny is "God with us," not "stuff with us," as if more stuff is going to make us ultimately happy, healthy and wise. It's not.

Christmas is a great time to get a reminder of this, because for too many people, Christmas has become more about stuff and less about God. Or, using the immortal words of TV's Bart Simpson, "Hey, since when is Christmas just about the presents? Aren't we forgetting the true meaning of Christmas? You know... the birth of Santa."

And to that, we respond using the immortal words of the Bible's Isaiah, when he says, "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."

It is because of the gift of Jesus Christ that we know how to refuse the evil and choose the good. In the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God assures us that not only is God with us through any trouble we may face, but that God will triumph over that which lays us low.

King Ahaz turned to the mighty army of Assyria for reassurance. And seeing this sign of his faithlessness, God sends him a much more powerful sign, a sign of hope and salvation – in the birth of a helpless baby. Even Isaiah would have found it hard to imagine that God's ultimate sign for all of creation would be God's own coming in the person of a helpless child.

But the gospel writers saw it. They looked back in history and saw God's Old Testament sign, and they saw how God was doing something new in their day. They saw how God was making his sign of reassurance and faithfulness visible for the whole world to see. The gospel writers saw the birth of Jesus.

The question for us is, are we still seeing and embracing the signs God gives to us everyday? Even in the midst of a world darkened by our own struggles, by untimely death, by senseless violence and deepest despair, can we still imagine the brightness of “God with us”?

And if not, who are we really trusting to save us – technology and gadgets, politicians and the government, even school systems and churches? Sure, any of these can be instruments of divine salvation, but only if we watch for – and follow – the signs of God’s blessing, as we employ technology, vote for and hold accountable our elected leaders, and support and participate in our school systems and churches.

There are countless ways of telling the story of Jesus’ birth, countless ways of pointing to the ending of the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

And as we learned from the orphan boy Misha, one of the best ways of telling the Christmas story is to get into the manger with the baby Jesus – to show all the world that it is God who will never abandon us, and that stuff just begets more stuff.

How will your Christmas story end this year? Who will you – who will I – be found alongside? It’s God’s story, but he lets us choose how to tell it.

So ask yourself this year, will the Christmas story told by you and your family – by me and my family – end with just more stuff in our lives, or with more Jesus!

Pastoral Prayer

O Blessed One, it is said that Christmas is for children. Indeed it is; it’s a feast for the young at heart, a feast for hiding beneath the tree gifts to surprise and delight the eternal child.

Peel back the cynicism from our eyes so that we may see holiness blazing at the tip of every branch, and see every tree as a Christmas tree.

Let us not be ashamed to dance with delight at hidden gifts wrapped in shimmering paper with bows of rainbow-colored ribbon.

But also grant us the youthful and wide-eyed wonder to recognize, and even to expect, life-giving miracles on every street corner, miracles of kindness and generosity and care.

Gift our too-often-closed-off hearts with the excitement of anticipation, that we might receive the true gifts of life, the capacity to feast and rejoice in the love of God.

Give birth within us the ability to rightly celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Christ Child, who loves and nurtures the child in all of us.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus, your son, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from
evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.