

Trinity United Methodist Church

December 20, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-17 (NIV)

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, **11** “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” **12** But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” **13** Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? **14** Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. **15** He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, **16** for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. **17** The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Growing up, I remember every Christmas, as the days grew closer and closer to Christmas day and I'd been staring for oh, so long at those presents under the tree, at least the ones that were for me, sneaking behind Mom and Dad's back when they were out of the room to do that “rattle” that Kim was talking about. And then as Christmas day would approach almost every year, I would *beg* my Dad to *please* let me open *just one present* early, like on Christmas Eve before we go to church for the Christmas Eve service. *Please, Dad, let me open just one present early.* And every year the answer was the same. *Nope.* He never has said why, and I'll ask him tonight when we do our Sunday evening chat, but it was just *nope* every year.

Then there was the first Christmas that I was finally old enough to go with Mom and Dad to the 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service at church. And we arrived home well after midnight because at First United Methodist Church in Hopewell, the Elmore's are the ones who always have to put the cat out after everyone else leaves--and if you don't

know what that expression means, ask some Southern person sitting near you. But we got home at least not until 12:30, and it dawned on me: “Hey, Dad. It’s Christmas morning. Let’s open presents *now*, or I’ll wake y’all up in just a few short hours, early like I usually do, to open gifts then!” And so a new tradition was born.

So imagine the shock to my system when last year, Mom and Dad came down with Aunt Margie on Christmas Eve. And due to practicalities of changing family traditions and so forth, we actually opened up presents on Christmas Eve with Mom and—*gasp*—Dad. It was *weird* to do that. But it’s what we did. Even today, Bekah says that I am one of the worst people to shop for a Christmas present to open on Christmas morning, because I’m one of those that, whatever I want or need earlier in the year, I go ahead and buy it. And so she never knows what to get me to actually put under the tree. I don’t really care, but anyway...

I must say, though, that there is something fun as a father with a son who is now begging *me*, “Come on, Dad, give me my presents early. Come on, Dad, let me open *just one* early.” And I can say, “Nope.” And maybe that’s why Dad did it, just to torture me.

But when it comes to Christmas, there is something about the timing of Christmas. Timing is everything when it comes to Christmas. For me, Christmas is always going to church at 11 o’clock on Christmas Eve and walking out the door singing *Silent Night* with candle in the hand at the stroke of midnight. (By the way, the Bishop tells us this year to make sure we *end* our Christmas Eve services in time so that y’all don’t get stopped on the way home for breaking curfew. You know what? If you tell the police officer, “I’m on the way home from church. It’s Christmas,” I think we’ll be okay. But anyway, I digress.)

So timing is everything when it comes to Christmas. It’s just something about the time of year. Let’s face it, if we had Christmas in July, in the dog days of summer, it just wouldn’t feel the same.

But this year, in the year of our Lord 2020, COVID has done its best to derail even the timing of Christmas. I’ve been very surprised that our governor and/or Bishop have not clamped down on us with the number of cases and the way that they are rising, even here in little old Smithfield, Virginia. In fact, I’m convinced that, watch out, right after Christmas we’re going to be shut down pretty hard. Because, after all, we would all consider our governor a Grinch if things were shut down beforehand.

Anyway. Timing is everything. And as COVID has been forcing us this year to live lives that are simpler; we’re not going as many places, we’re not doing as much, depending on our comfort level with being out and about—the theme of Advent this

year has been “Simply Christmas.” What does it mean to get back to the simple message of Christmas, especially during the Advent season?

The first Sunday we talked about Hope. Simply hope. The simple, but yet profound hope that God still reigns, despite any and all evidence to the contrary. That Jesus, the hope that Jesus will come, not just once in Bethlehem long ago, but that Jesus will come again one day to make everything right once and for all.

The next week we talked about faith, that we might have the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the hearts to believe. The evidence that God indeed still reigns and the grace to keep that faith until Jesus indeed comes again.

Last week we talked about joy, as we consider the joy that will be ours when everything is set right by God. It’s that joy that we don’t have to wait to experience, but we get to experience even now as Jesus lives in our hearts, despite the circumstances and situations that try to drain and steal and kill our joy.

And today we’re talking about love. Simply love. It’s a hymn in the hymnal that we often sing at Christmas: *Love Came Down at Christmas. Love all lovely, love divine. Love was born at Christmas. Stars and angels gave the sign.*

But as we’ve been spending Advent in the book of Isaiah, this text from Isaiah, chapter 7, doesn’t really seem to be about love. It speaks of the birth of a child, which is a loving kind of thing, but it’s the birth of a child in the midst of violence and war and a tough spot. Where’s the love in this?

The historical context, as always, is everything, and sheds light on understanding this passage from Isaiah. Isaiah says that the Lord spoke to Ahaz. Ahaz at the time was the king of the southern kingdom of Judah. This was after the kingdom of Israel had split into two. The northern kingdom retained the name Israel, and the southern kingdom became known as Judah. Its capital was Jerusalem. You would think that these two sibling nations would get along more so than they didn’t, but this was a case where they did not get along. And the king of Israel had joined forces with the king of Aram, or modern-day Syria. And they sent word that they were on their way to attack Jerusalem.

Remember, Israel sits on the major trade route through the eastern Mediterranean region. It’s between the powerful kingdoms of the north and Egypt to the south, and what city sat right smack on those trade routes? All the trade routes went right through the city of Jerusalem. You control the trade routes, you control the money. You control the money and you have all the power, right? Wash, rinse, repeat, all throughout human history.

And so Ahaz is sitting there in Jerusalem with this threat, once again being picked on by neighboring nations and wondering what in the world to do. He was thinking about

forming an alliance with someone else, like this new and upcoming empire way to the north, the Assyrian empire, and maybe even to form an alliance with Egypt that was strong and powerful to the south. But regardless, this threat had Ahaz shaking in his boots.

But God says in the beginning of chapter 7, “Do not be afraid.” Does that sound familiar, especially at Christmas time? God goes on to say that these guys and their armies will not amount to a hill of beans. “Keep hope, Israel. Keep the faith.”

Think about your own life. What threatens you? What threatens to wreck your hope, your faith, your joy? What leaves you shaking in your boots and troubles your heart? Maybe it’s something related to health, or finances, or the larger world afoot.

God says to Ahaz, “You know what? I’ll prove to you that it’s going to be okay. That what I’m saying will come to pass. Ask for a sign, Ahaz. Ask me for anything, and I will show it to you as proof that what I’m saying is true.” And so in the beginning of our reading today, Ahaz said, “I will not ask. I will not put the Lord to the test.”

And to our modern ears we might think that Ahaz sounds all kinds of pious here, right? Even Jesus himself said back to Satan in the wilderness when he was tempted, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” right? But here in this context, Ahaz is really saying, “Thanks, God, but you know what? I’m going to hedge my bets here. Because I can’t really see you. Sometimes you seem kind of absent. I’m not really sure I can trust you. But you know who I can see? Who looks big and strong and powerful? Those Assyrians. I can see their tanks. I can see their missiles. I can see their ships and other instruments of war. I can see them. They’re bigger than the other big bullies on the playground right now. And Egypt to the south, I can see them, too. Maybe I’ll put my trust with you, God; maybe I’ll put my trust with them. I’m not going to ask for a sign and fully commit to you, though.”

So naturally, God loses his patience a bit and says, “You know what? I’m going to give you a sign anyway. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. For before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.”

In this text, we see the prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus, the Messiah. It’s a doctrine that helps us believe in the divinity of Jesus—fully God and fully human. But in the context of this reading in Isaiah, it’s really also about timing. Because in the Hebrew here that’s translated as “virgin,” it can also be interpreted as, “young marriageable woman,” like some of the young women here in our congregation today. It would be about that age. A young, marriageable woman, and especially in the days of ancient times, when life expectancy was nowhere near as long as it is these days, there was no

putting off marriage for a woman until the 30s or 40s to focus on career or whatever else they might choose to focus on. In fact, it was up to the Dad to arrange for her to be married off as soon as she reached that age as possible, so that she could produce more heirs for the family, so they could produce more members that would contribute to a healthy village and society.

But Isaiah says, God says, before that can happen, before her Dad can get her hitched to somebody else, Immanuel will be born. “God with us,” is what Immanuel means. In other words, before our human plans and agencies and so forth—God will be with us soon. Before the child can eat solid food, definitely before he reaches the age of accountability, this threat that Ahaz is facing will be gone. Sooner than later.

You see, this passage is all about timing. It’s all about God’s timing. And God’s timing is always perfect. It’s about what God will do in God’s timing. That God, even though Ahaz is hedging his bets, isn’t putting his faith fully in God. God is still committed to providing provision and deliverance for Ahaz. Why? Why does God even bother with this guy any more? It’s because God is a covenant God and not a contract God. In a contract, if either party fails to live up to their end of the deal, it voids the contract and it lets the other party off the hook. But in a covenant, no matter what the other party does, we’re still on the hook for what we have promised to do. No matter how far we stray from God’s will and God’s ways and God’s love, God has covenanted with us to always be with us, because God is love. And love, in God’s timing, is perfect.

It’s certainly not the sweaty palms and racing heartbeats kind of love. It’s not even the love that makes us happy, like when so many of us, thank you so much to you who were able to give to the Angel Tree families and the Tree of Warmth, in our love for our community we bless others in our community. It’s not even that kind of love. Because God’s love doesn’t always give us what we want. But God’s love will give us what we need.

This passage for today ends with the promise, “the Lord will bring on you and your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

In other words, God is saying, “All right, Ahaz. You want to disobey me? You want to hedge your bets and take matters into your own hands? Go right ahead. Be my guest. But it won’t end well for you.”

St. Paul reminds us that love does not insist on its own way. And John reminds us in his first letter that God is indeed love. Though God does not insist on his own way, in the end, God wins. And therefore, love always wins out, in love’s perfect timing.

Speaking of timing, some 400 years then transpired between the end of what we now know as the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. Again, for a reference point, our nation has only been in existence a little over 200 years. Double that, and that's how long the people of Israel had been living, waiting. Put yourself in their shoes. "I thought that God was supposed to be with us sooner than later. Where are you, God? I thought God was supposed to make things right sooner than later. Things are still bad. Now we've got the Romans beating us down."

In the fullness of time, though, of God's timing, God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin. To a young, marriageable woman, in God's perfect timing. Mary sings a song that we read earlier in the service, the Canticle of Mary. She sings that yes, she did know what was up. She did know what God was doing in her life, what God was doing in the world. She sings, *His mercy extends to those who fear Him; from generation to generation, He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped His servant, Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his servants forever, just as He promised our ancestors.*

You see, in this fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Jesus, God's "soon" becomes God's "now," even for us here today. But it's not just God's "now," because as we look at Mary's Song, there are some things that are as yet incomplete. The idea of filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty? Look at the income inequality gap. It's the worst it's ever been, and it continues to grow day by day, literally, to the point it's hard to fathom how much worse it can get before it all comes crashing down around us.

The idea of bringing down rulers from their thrones but lifting up the humble? Look at the power dynamics that still exist in this world around us. A lot of people threatened, those in power particularly, get threatened by words of scripture like this, because they might stand to lose. It's not about some losing and others winning. It's about the gospel of Jesus Christ making everyone equal in the eyes of our Lord. It's an old gospel song: *The ground is level at the foot of the cross.*

I don't know about you, but I look forward to that day when we won't have to fight for resources any more. When some have while others struggle without, the day all will be made right and equal before the Lord.

And so we still live as Advent people as we wait because in Jesus, God's "soon" is "now," but it's also "not quite yet." But it's still "soon." Because it's not up to our timing. It's up to God's timing.

But still, we want what we want. We need what we need. And we want it and need it, like, yesterday. Right? The waiting to be rid of these things, waiting for the cure to cancer and diabetes and other things that ail us and destroy us. Waiting for wars to end once and for all. We wait. Because it's God's timing and not ours. But even in the waiting, we don't wait passively; we wait actively.

I'm reminded this Christmas, our first Christmas without her, of my mother-in-law, Brenda Callis, who was given a human time frame in which she was expected to live after her cancer diagnosis of two years. She wound up living for five years. And the doctors kept telling her, "What's keeping you going is not the medicine we're giving you. It's hope and faith and joy and love," which she found in Jesus.

God's timing is perfect. And because God is love, God's love is perfect. And timing is everything with true love, as God's timing is perfect. So as we wait, let us wait with hope, with faith, with joy, and with love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.