

“Believing in the Sign”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

December 18, 2016 - John Knox Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 7:10-16

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

What is it about fear that consumes us? It can eat us alive. Fear of the unknown and what lies ahead. Fear of losing...losing your job, losing your marriage, losing your children, losing your house, losing a family member, losing your control, losing power, losing your mind, losing your life.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to the fearful in all of us today. God’s messenger has been sent to relieve the fear in King Ahaz. This man of power reigns over Judah and Jerusalem. He has been threatened by 2 kings from Israel - Ephraim and Aram. They are plotting to attack the lands of Ahaz. The king is afraid and he fears for his people. This king is terribly frightened of losing everything. If we back up and read the first 9 verses of Isaiah 7, we read that Ahaz is trembling like the forest in the wind! God sees what is going on and sends the prophet to reassure him by hearing the words we so often hear from God throughout the Bible, “Do not fear!”

But like so many of us, Ahaz was still terrified of what lied ahead. He can’t let go of the fear and hold onto his faith. So, Isaiah comes back and tells the king to ask God for a sign to know of God’s presence. He says make sure it is big so there is no question about it. Have this sign be as deep as Sheol and as high as heaven! But, Ahaz refuses because he does not want to test God. It is if he is stuck and simply cannot move forward.

And just as persistent as God is for us, Isaiah comes back and tells Ahaz that whether he wants a sign or not, he is going to get one. It will an extraordinary sign. One that he would never imagine. Look Ahaz...see there will be a woman, who will give birth to a son and his name will be Immanuel! See...look Ahaz, God will come to you in the most unexpected way to be with you! God will give you that divine protection that you are seeking but you have to have faith and believe it.

Unfortunately, Ahaz never truly has faith in God. He turns to the pagan gods and worships false idols. He lets the temple get destroyed and Judah falls to Assyria. His 16-year reign falls in ruins.

I wonder why Ahaz never could believe in the sign from God and know that God was there in his presence? As we approach this week leading us to the final push to get to Bethlehem to welcome the gift of Immanuel, how will we receive this gift? How do we believe God is with us? On Christmas Day, we will hear God’s Word from the Gospel of Matthew when the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah comes into being. Matthew 1:23

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel. Which means God is with us.”

This past week my Spiritual Director read an Ann Weems’s poem “Toward the Light” to me and I wonder if this was Ahaz struggle. Will this be our struggle? (Kneeling in Bethlehem by Ann Weems; The Westminster Press; 1980; p. 21)

Too often our answer to the darkness is not running toward Bethlehem but running away. We ought to know by now that we can't see where we're going in the dark. Running away is rampant... separation is stylish: separation from mates, friends, from self. Run and tranquilize, don't talk about it, avoid. Run away and join the army of those who have already run away. When are we going to learn that Christmas peace comes only when we turn and face the darkness? Only then will we be able to see the Light of the World....Jesus Christ.

It seems like so many people in society are running away from something. They are afraid. They seem to be so caught up in the chaos that it fuels their energy. They can't seem to find God's peace.

I think this was similar to what my friend Joyce was going through 4 weeks ago when I last preached. She was in a very dark place due to the effects of the chemo treatments which had worn her down. Her pain and fear had definitely taken her away from the road to Bethlehem.

When the time for my visit arrived, I had no idea what to expect. Joyce was able to have her treatment the week before my visit. I feared that she would be extremely tired and weak. I feared that she would be fighting headaches and be nauseous. I feared hopelessness.

But when I arrived at her home in Bowling Green, I found the sign of Immanuel. I got to meet her oncology nurse when I took her to get fluids. She is a true angel but she tells it like it is. Her name is Michelle and one thing that she said that stuck with me is “If you want to win, you got to play.” She didn't mean the lottery. She meant if you want to beat this thing. You have got to do everything the doctors tell you to do. My friend said that she would never have thought that she would be thankful to receive chemo but she was thankful that her white cell count cooperated with the right numbers.

It was amazing how her church and social groups have set up a website where they can coordinate sign-ups for prepared meals. People are bringing in food every other day. One lady that stopped by was a breast cancer survivor. She said that Joyce will have a love / hate relationship with her chemo. It will be her best friend and your worst enemy.

No one ever wants to get cancer. Joyce has no idea how this will turn out. But the fear I heard in her voice prior to my visit had been replaced with hope. This could only be contributed to God's presence. God could be seen in the meals. God could be seen in Joyce's renewed energy. God could be seen in the joy the Joyce received when we went to a Christmas party and people showered her with love because they were so glad to see

her. God could be seen in the love and support that she gets from her children and her husband. God could be seen in the mountain of cards that she has received throughout this journey...some you wrote to her!

When was the last time that you received a sign from God? How do you receive it? Where do you see the signs of God's presence? This last week the Advent Bible study met and discussed this passage. Ann Hamel brought up the sign of God that she has seen in social media over the course of this week concerning the cross on the Christmas tree in Knightstown, Indiana. For those of you who don't know about this, Knightstown decorates a tree in their town square. The star that adorned the top of the tree broke and so they replaced it with a cross. This got Joe Tompkins, a local resident, upset. So he filled a lawsuit with the ACLU to have the cross removed.

The town's council voted to do just that as they could not afford the legal fees to fight it. This got the town's people upset and in retaliation they have put out crosses all over their lawns. Many more people outside Knightstown have shown up for cross carrying vigils to protest their decision. It is still up for debate if this is a permanent decision. But whether it is or not. What I find interesting was the post the council made on it's Facebook page saying, *"Our town has come together and is standing as one community united (with the exception of a couple of people). We can still make a stand by placing crosses everywhere, which people are doing. Remember this is the Christmas season, show love, compassion and understanding to everyone, even if you don't agree. Sometimes a little love goes a long way to mending fences and getting things accomplished."* Another resident observed that this has been the closest that this community has been in years.

When we gather together on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (we are lucky that we get to celebrate on both days this year), we will celebrate how God comes to us in the most unexpected way and in the most unexpected place. May we be ready to receive and believe in this sign of God's love for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

As we leave here today, hear now these word by Ann Weems - "Angels Still Appear"
*Angels still appear to those ready to receive blessings in spite of the barren impossibility of their lives.
Elizabeth still recognizes Jesus and calls him Lord, receiving him to her heart, in spite of the distraction of her own blessing.
Blessings still come to those who believe that nothing is impossible in the hand of God.
Mary still gives birth, not just every Advent, Mary still gives birth each day to this Child who advents into hearts, unexpectedly and forever.
Herods still live who would kill this Child, but Mary and Joseph still flee into the desert, and the night, to protect the One given into their keeping.
Doors still slam in the inns of the world,
Herods still plot to kill, deserts and darkness still threaten our safety, but God still lives.
In spite of the war and terror, Mary gives birth to the Prince of Peace.
In spite of hunger, Mary gives birth to the Bread of Life.
In spite of lost sheep, Mary gives birth to the Good Shepherd.
In spite of hearts pregnant with hatred, Mary give birth to LOVE.
It is not done! It is not done! It is not done!
The birthing is not over. The blessings continue. Angels wait in the wings!*