

Love Calls Out

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

Good Morning Church Family and Good Morning to those of you who are joining us online this morning. It's hard for me to believe that we've arrived on the fourth Sunday of Advent, that we are exactly one week away from Christmas. I'm grateful for the ways that Jesus meets us every day, and in these special seasons of the Christian calendar.

Our Old Testament text for this morning is a tricky one. It takes some effort on the part of the listener to unravel what exactly is happening. Notice how the scripture from Isaiah that Ed read for us this morning begins, "Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz". Again, the Lord spoke...this signals to us that we've stepped into a conversation that has already been happening between the Lord and Ahaz. Let's backtrack a bit, to help us get the fullest picture of what is happening in this story. Who's ready for some ancient near east political history!? I can tell you're as excited as I was.

So, at the time this scripture was written Israel was divided into two Kingdoms. There was the kingdom of Israel to the north, and the kingdom of Judah to the south. Ahaz, the man in our story this morning, is the King of Judah and lives in the capital city of Jerusalem. Now the King of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, has formed an alliance with the neighboring nation of Aram. Now, these two nations, Israel and Aram are planning to attack Jerusalem and take control of the nation of Judah. Apparently, because Judah

refused to join a larger coalition with another, larger neighbouring nation of Assyria. Is this making sense? We've got King Ahaz of the southern kingdom of Judah, awaiting this attack from Israel and Aram. King Ahaz and all of Judah with him are terrified. Verse two of Isaiah 7 says "their hearts and the hearts of their people shook as the trees of a forest shake when there is a wind." Super visceral, poetic language. And for his part, King Ahaz, the king facing attack thinks, "What's the point here? I should just surrender to Assyria and turn my kingdom over."

This is not the Lord's plan for Judah, to surrender to a pagan nation, and so the Lord send the Prophet Isaiah to speak with King Ahaz on his behalf. Isaiah tells Ahaz, "Listen, the Lord does not want you to surrender, and you know that. These two other kingdoms that you are so afraid of are just "smouldering stumps" (that's the image used in verse 4 of Isaiah 7). The Lord is saying, it's not going happen, I'll protect you, just trust in me, the Lord and hold fast." But the voices of attack are ringing so loud in Ahaz's ears that he refuses to trust in the Lord. now this is where our scripture picks up this morning, So Isaiah says, "Ask the Lord for sign! Literally anything in heaven or even in hell and God will give to you to show you that he will look after you and your kingdom." And Ahaz, under the guise of righteousness, "No no, I will not test the Lord!" When I first read this, without the bigger context, I thought alright, look at Ahaz, good man, refusing to test God, which harkens back to a command in the Book of Exodus that says you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.

But with this bigger picture of the context of the rest of the chapter, we see that what's actually happening is that Ahaz doesn't want to see a sign, because he knows God will show it to him and then he will have to make the hard choice to trust the God that he cannot see, to hold fast in faith rather than surrendering to the forces that he can see, the armies at his gates.

And then, in a moment of frustration with Ahaz, the Lord gives his beautiful message through Isaiah the Prophet. "Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned." Whether he likes it or not, God gives Ahaz, and all of us a sign- Incarnation. "I am coming! I will be there on the ground with you, born of flesh and bone, like you, I am and I am going to be Immanuel, God-With-You!"

This God-on-the-Ground, God-With-Us, God-Breaking-Into-Our Midst, is at the heart of this word to a fearful king, and the heart at the Word for us today. God gave us a sign of his great, persistent, love break in to our midst. Our God who gave a fearful king, a weary people, a kingdom in a despair a promise-I am coming to be with you. You will know my love and see my love because I'm going to make myself like you. Love is the motivation, and Incarnation is the Action. Notice too that God doesn't come through because Ahaz is so faithful, or even because Ahaz asked for a sign, rather God chooses to give this sign, to give Jesus because of God's unfailing love and faithfulness

towards all people. God's love is a great, glorious to his good, messy children.

We see this idea of God's movement towards us in action again in our Matthew Passage for this morning too. "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel.* (*Emmanuel* means "God with us.") When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus."

Matthew's re-telling of the birth of Jesus is much less popular than Luke's, it lacks some of the color, some of the nativity scene cast of characters that we know and love. Certainly, each of the four gospel writers had their own purposes in how they chose to craft their narratives, but struck me about Matthew's version of the story, when read side by side with today's story of King Ahaz, is how God is the protagonist, God is the one driving the action of the story forward. Not to discredit the faithful work of Mary and

Joseph, their own consent to participate in God's work, but there is a sense that God breaking in, and God will do as God sees fit. Mary becomes pregnant. God tells Joseph to get on board! You will have Jesus because he will save his people from their sins! Indeed, that's exactly how it happened, exactly as God said it would.

So, what is the good news for us in the here and now? What is the response that we are called to through these two stories, and the truth they tell us about God?

The first response that we are called to is to trust God. Sounds so basic and simple, but just like King Ahaz illustrates, that's really hard. I've been contemplating this question of trusting God when the news is filled with scary, terrible headlines of hospitals overrun, seriously sick kids filling up emergency rooms, and the shortage of children's tylenol and amoxicillin. There's wars, there's interpersonal conflicts, there's family system challenges, there's a million reasons to be fearful and anxious about the state of the world. Like King Ahaz, there very tangible, visible "enemies" at our gates, and God is asking to trust him, to hold on and believe that God is still in charge, still working, still actively present in the daily workings of our lives and of our world. Sometimes this yielding of trust is a daily battle, and hourly battle for me as someone who struggles a lot with worry and anxiety. Sometimes it feels like I'm constantly course correcting back towards trusting God, and I think (I hope!) that's okay.

Secondly, like Ahaz, God tells us that he is always breaking in, and giving us signs of his goodness and his sovereignty in the world. "Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign.

The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel.” Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign and God says, doesn’t matter! Here it is! What I think is really beautiful and gracious about that is this idea that God is giving us signs of his goodness, his grace, and his LOVE all over in our daily lives, but we need the eyes to see it and the ears to hear.

A couple of weeks ago, Taylor was saying how he thinks happiness is a radical pursuit. Now to be clear, he wasn’t saying that pursuing his happiness above all else is the the GREATEST Good-he wasn’t talking about hedonism, not at all. He was saying that there is something radical about looking for, noticing, and then proclaiming the goodness and beauty that there is in the world, especially when everything feels doomy and gloomy, especially in seasons of shadow. And I agreed that is a radical action, because all the Goodness and Beauty in the world is a gift to us, a sign from God to us about his love. This practicing of noticing goes beyond seeing the glass at half full, instead of half empty, it’s about retaining our hearts and our minds to notice these signs, and that in turn deepens our trust in God.

A few weeks ago, I ended up in the ER with Junia. Thankfully, it ended up being nothing serious, but it was one of those things that you needed to get checked out. Any trip to ER can be full of reasons to complain, things to feel deeply discouraged by, but there’s also goodness. When the young med student came into the room to check Junia, and it was clear that pediatrics was not her calling, but just part of the rotation she had to do, I

reminded myself that there are still young people who want to be Drs and Nurses, even after everything we've seen over the last few years. When it's minus 40, windy and the dog needs walked, I'm thankful that I get to see the sunrise (something that never happens in the warmer months!) That my body moves easily and there's crisp, cold air to breathe in. It may sound trivial, or little more than appreciate the daily things, but why can't the daily things be the in-breaking of God? Why can't the small miracles of human life be signs of God's in-breaking in our world? The Lord himself will give you a sign - a baby. A baby. The perfectly ordinary miracle of a baby was the sign that God chose to be with us.

I think it's a good reminder for us that Advent and the waiting that it brings is because God chose to be among us. His stubborn, deep as the ocean, as high as the heavens love is what has motivated God to make the first move again and again and again. It's the love that preserved Ahaz's kingdom, when he was ready to give in. It's the love that brought Jesus into this world through the ordinary couple, Mary and Joseph. It's the love that puts air in our lungs, friendships in our lives, and reminds us, in a million ordinary ways, that we belong to God. It's always been about God's love initiation, and it always will be.

The challenge for me this week, and maybe for some of you too, is to pay attention to where God is reaching out to us? Where does God initiate loving contact with us? How can we pay attention despite noise that often can fill this last week of Advent?

Love begins and ends with God, and for that we can be deeply thankful.

Let's pray!