

The Jesus Gift of Joy
Isaiah 7:1-14 and Luke 1:26-38
December 24, 2017 10:00 a.m.
Fourth Sunday of Advent
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This morning I want us to look at two conversations that are recorded in the Bible. Both conversations are strange and unexpected. The first takes place between God and King Ahaz. Ahaz was the ruler of Judah, and Jerusalem was his capital. Ahaz wasn't a good king. He was one of Judah's worst, actually, but he was God's anointed for a period of time. Isaiah 7 gives us the details of a crazy conversation between God and this insecure, impulsive king.

Ahaz has learned that two other kings are plotting to dethrone him and lay waste to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the city of God, is the place of solace and security for the people of God. It is the place where the Hebrews travel during the year to come close to God. These two kings want to replace Ahaz with another king who will be more cooperative in joining the alliance they are forming. These two enemies of Israel corral their forces and attack Jerusalem, but they can't get past the city walls. It is, however, a close call and Ahaz is alarmed. "The hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind." (Is. 7:2)

Shaking like a tree in a storm—that's fear, and rightfully so. These two kings have come to invade Jerusalem and tear the throne from Ahaz, but then God tells Ahaz not to worry, it's not going to happen. God is so sure of this that God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign that it will be as God has said. In a strange response, Ahaz tells God, "I won't ask; I won't test the Lord," (7:12) to which God responds by giving Ahaz a sign anyway. And in one of the most famous OT scriptures of prophecy, Isaiah says that the Lord's sign will be that a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and he will be named Immanuel which as we know means, "God with us."

The people of God are afraid. Their king is shaking in his boots. They feel as if they will lose their place of solace and security. To them God says, "I am here. I am going to give you a sign that I'm here, and the sign will be...." wait for it: "a baby born from a virgin named "God is with us." That's quite a sign. "A

virgin will conceive” is pretty much the definition of impossible. What could be more impossible?

But, God often uses the most impossible thing you can think of as the very sign that God is with us. And in the impossible being made possible, we find joy.

All of us have places that hold special meaning for us, that provide us with feelings of security and belonging. For some of us, that is the home we live in now while for others it might be the place we grew up, a lake where we learned to fish, or a favorite family vacation spot. Maybe it's a person where we find comfort and solace.

For much of autumn, the screens on our smart devices were filled with images of people's sources of security being lost—swept away in hurricanes, flooded beyond rehabilitation or burned to the ground by raging fires. All of it gone in a matter of a few seconds or minutes. And, there are other ways we lose what tethers us. A spouse who was your soulmate is taken away through divorce, betrayal or death. A business venture that wasn't just a job, but your dream, for one reason or another is now up in flames. Some of us know how an illness or a layoff or a loss can take away much of what we hold dear. Some know how depression or anxiety can ruin and destroy what is good and beautiful in our lives. What do we do when tragedy strikes? What do we do when we lose something or someone we love? What do we do when our lives simply don't go the way we thought they would or should? Can there still be joy? Hold that thought....

Now let's listen in on our second strange conversation. This one takes place about 700 years after the conversation between God and Ahaz. Instead of a king, this time God is conversing with a young woman who is betrothed but not yet married.

Think about the brides you know or perhaps that you once were. I don't know if Mary had any similarities to the young women for whom I have officiated their weddings, but I think it's reasonable to assume she had some expectations about how her life would go in the future she was dreaming of with Joseph. Maybe she hadn't planned it down to the last detail, but surely she had a vision for how her wedding day and married life with Joseph would unfold. All of that was taken away in one simple message from God. “You will conceive and give birth to a son,” she is told. Those of us who have heard that message—that a baby is on the way—through a doctor or a test and regardless of the circumstances, know that statement changes everything. And it changes everything for Mary. Whatever she

was hoping for or planning will never happen, at least not the way she envisioned. Mary asks the most logical of questions: “how?” She knew the impossibility of what the angel had announced to her. God often uses the most impossible thing you can think of as the very sign that God is with you. And in the impossible being made possible, there is joy.

Ahaz, the king of Judah, is literally shaking like a tree in the wind. He is told, “Be careful and stay calm. Don’t fear, and don’t lose heart over these two pieces of smoking torches” (Is 7:4). God speaks words of courage in scary times that lead to joy.

Mary is told, “Don’t be afraid. God is honoring you” (Luke 1:30). God speaks words of courage in scary times that lead to joy.

What do we do when tragedy strikes? What do we do when we lose something or someone we love? What do we do when our lives don’t go the way we thought they would or should? Can there still be joy?

Yes, God says. There can be joy. That’s what Advent is about. It’s about our hoping, believing, waiting for God to come and make something out of our mess. We wait for God to step into what appears to be impending doom and save us. Advent holds out the belief that in the midst of this kind of waiting, God brings the gift of joy.

We often fail to make the connection that Advent is a time when we sing about light because we are in darkness. We sing about hope because we are longing for something more. We sing about joy because our hearts know sadness.

Remember that the sign of Immanuel, God with us, is a baby being born to a woman who has no business having a baby. Right now, some of us are experiencing a fire that seems to be burning out of control and threatens to take our whole life up in flames. Perhaps like Ahaz, we feel that there is no way to hold off impending doom. Or like Mary, we find ourselves in a situation that seems impossible. I had this plan! I thought my life would go this way, and now it is gone. How? How can this be?

The story of Jesus’ birth tells us that hope is coming, and with the hope of Jesus comes a gift we surely did not see coming. It is the gift of joy. And what is our sign? A baby born in a manger. God with us. Maybe that’s why so many

people are particularly generous at Christmastime. We give and serve those who are vulnerable and find themselves in scary, impossible places because the Jesus story leads us to want to share the hope and joy we find in Christ with others. We want to lead others to ask the question, “How can this be?” We hope they will wonder how God could do the impossible. The answer to “How can this be?” is “God with us.”

There are many ways to share the joy we know from Jesus being constantly with us. Three that immediately come to mind are the joy of encouragement, the joy of thoughtfulness and the joy of graciousness. In the competitive, impatient, aggressive culture in which we live, people are often criticized, put down, intimidated, and made to feel “less than.” Christ came to lift people up, not tear them down, and when we encourage others, we are sharing the gift of joy.

When we use “people eyes” to pay attention to those around us, opportunities to be thoughtful will never be in short supply. Cards, a phone call or email, food or flowers—any small gesture that says, “I see you,” “I care about you,” spreads the gift of joy and pays dividends that will last for eternity.

Finally, when gracious, sacrificial love flows from us, the gift of joy shines like the stars in the night sky. Christ came to show us what God is like and what God wants us to be like, and that can all be summed up in the word, “love.” When we graciously spread the love of God, the joy it brings is the best and most abiding gift of all. And all because of a baby born in a manger. God with us. God born to us this night. God with us still. Amen.