

Sunday, December 18, 2016 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “The Lord himself will give you a sign”

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:10-17

(The second reading for Sunday will be Matthew 1:18-25.)

Note: Generally speaking, I think this is the season of the year to enjoy the music and listen to the story – and not to get too caught up in the Hebrew and Greek and scholarly debates about the meanings of words. On the other hand, one of my best Advent/Christmas seasons ever was the year I took time to read Raymond E. Brown’s massive work, *The Birth of the Messiah*, one of the most scholarly treatments of the birth stories (in Matthew and Luke) ever written. So, I suppose it is possible to do careful study and still find the joy and hope that are at the center of this season!

One more thing. We tend to think of Isaiah as the work of only one author, but most scholars tend to think of Isaiah as the product of at least three authors. The reasons for this are complex, but the most persuasive reason is that the time span involved in the writing would be next-to-impossible for one person. For example, Isaiah chapters 1-39 seem to be addressed to Israel before the exile, chapters 40-55 during the exile, and chapters 56-66 after the return from exile. Somehow the entire book hangs together, though, and one reason for that is the hope expressed for what God will do at some future date. And the reading for this week is certainly an example of that theme!

1. The reading opens with God telling King Ahaz to ask for a sign of God’s intentions (vs. 10-11). Interestingly, Ahaz refuses to do this, saying that he does not want to “put the LORD to the test” (vs. 12). How admirable of him! So, God decides to give Ahaz a sign whether he wants one or not! We’ll get to that sign in the next paragraph, but for now please note that looking for signs of God’s intentions has a long history. How often have you asked God to show you what to do? How often have you said, “Just give me a sign.” These verses seem to say that God does indeed communicate with us in that way. One theologian has written that we believe in a “talkative God.” God is “speaking” to us all the time. But are we paying attention. Do you look for signs?
2. An interesting exercise (this week or some other time) would be to search for all the biblical instances of “this will be a sign for you.” They occur in both Old and New Testaments and seem to be a frequent way that God communicates with his people. See Exodus 3:12. The angels in Luke 2:12 also say, “And this will be a sign for you...you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes...” So, the formula (repeated over and over in scripture) seems to be prophecy plus sign. Maybe one of the problems in our own communication with God is that we fail to remember this connection. There needs to be a clear prophecy followed by a sign – not wishful thinking followed by a sign!
3. The sign that God gives here is (vs. 14) “the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Spend some time thinking about this sign. The birth of a baby is not all that unusual. It is when it is OUR child or grandchild, but the truth is that children are born all the time, every day. We are supposed to see here, aren’t we, that God speaks to us in the mundane, ordinary, prosaic events of life? While we are looking for spectacular, unmistakable signs, isn’t God instead to be found in the quiet, barely noticeable events of life? Where do you look for signs?
4. Okay, that brings us to “the young woman.” Lots of controversy has been generated over this translation. One reason that the NIV came into existence after the RSV was the translation of this word (and a few more just like it). In the Hebrew the word is clearly, unmistakably “young woman.” How do we know that? Because Hebrew has a word for virgin – *almah* - and Isaiah doesn’t use it. On the other hand, the Septuagint (or the Greek version of the Old Testament) uses the word “virgin” here. Which one should it be?

Matthew reads Isaiah as a sign pointing to the birth of Jesus, and he uses the word “virgin.” For your reflection and discussion, you should know that the woman Isaiah refers to here was probably known to both Ahaz and Isaiah. She could even have been the prophet’s wife – or the king’s wife. Either way, this birth carried special significance. I can think of good theological reasons to argue in favor of a virgin birth (or “virginal conception” as Raymond E. Brown prefers), but I wonder if any of that makes a difference here. Isn’t the point that in the middle of national catastrophe, with the kingdom about to collapse in flames, a baby is being born, a reason for hope has come among them? (If you are discussing this in a group, I wish I could listen to your conversation about this matter!)

5. Vs.14 – “Immanuel” – Volumes could be written about this word and what it means. But maybe a good spiritual exercise for this season would be to examine what it means that God is with us. How exactly is God with us?