

Sunday, December 22, 2019
"The Gift of a Good Name"
Isaiah 7:10 – 16
Matthew 1:18-25

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 7:10 – 16

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore 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. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For 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.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Christmas Makes Me Grumpy

My children and my spouse will tell you, Christmas makes me grumpy. Now I do love buying and wrapping presents. I love decorating the house and going to parties. I have Michael Buble's Christmas album and the Sesame Street Christmas playing most of December. We bake cookies and write Christmas cards and admire the lights around town. At church, I love hearing the words of the prophets and the songs of the angels. But I get grumpy because there are so many images of perfect Christmas, from my memory or from the media, that I can never live up to. So I fuss at my children and I rush past someone in need, while trying to have the right outfit for the party or check off all the boxes of our many Christmas traditions.

Christmas Makes Some People Sad

Many of my friends have been telling me this week that Christmas makes them sad. Some have lost babies. Others spouses or parents. Some have lost children to addiction. Others have lost jobs or health. Some have lost hope that the thing they most wish for will ever come to pass. One nine-year-old friend of mine, Peep, has been lighting a spiral of candles each evening, one for each day in December. Peep's mom, Julie posts a picture on Facebook of Peep lighting the candle of the day along with the prayer she prays as she lights it. Here is what

Julie's post said on Day 10 with 10 candles lit: "Peep thanked God for the sacrifice he allowed his beloved son to make for each of us." But on Day 11, there was no light on the candles, only smoke. Peep's mom wrote: "Tonight, dear friends, we only have a picture of extinguished candles, because for some reason, today was the day that Peep really confronted mortality for the first time. She has lost loved ones before, but her childlike faith has carried her through. Today, she grieved over the very idea of death, and it was painful to witness. When we put her into her bed, I told her to rest, and she cried, "How can I?" This, I truly understand. How do we go on living in the face of death? She knows my answer already. But it is so very hard all the same. Please pray for her tender heart." And on Day 12, this was Peep's prayer: "Lord, please help us to make the most of the short time we have. Help us to really love and enjoy each other while we are together." The growing light of Advent sometimes highlights the darkest places of our souls.

Ahaz was Frightened

If you ask one of my friends what she wants for Christmas, she will always say, "world peace." But that seems as far away today as it did for the prophets. I'm grumpy at Christmas, some people are sad, Ahaz was afraid. There were two armies bearing down on Jerusalem, and he saw no way out. The prophet Isaiah came to him, and said, "ask God for a sign." Ahaz tries to be faithful and says he

will not put God to the test, but Isaiah insists, that even if Ahaz will not ask for a sign, God will give one. Then Isaiah points to a young woman, and says, see... a young woman will bear a child, and she will name him, "Immanuel," which means, God is with us. By the time that child is old enough to eat solid food, to know right from wrong, those kings and those kingdoms will be past. The child is a sign, that God is with you in this present trouble, and a sign that the trouble will not last forever.

Joseph was?

I am grumpy at Christmas, some people are sad, Ahaz was afraid, Joseph was... perplexed? Sad? Disappointed? His fiancé was found to be expecting a child, and it was not his. Joseph may have been these things, perplexed, sad, disappointed, angry even, but the text says, Joseph was righteous. And because Joseph was righteous, he intended to "dismiss Mary quietly." He intended not to shame her. Now often, when I hear that a person is righteous, I think that this person would expose and condemn any wrongdoing. And it certainly appeared that Mary had been up to some wrongdoing. This wasn't the perfect marriage (read Christmas) that Joseph had had in mind. But the text says, Joseph was "righteous." The Hebrews had a word for this kind of righteousness, that word is "hessed," and it

means, “loving kindness.” Joseph intended to treat Mary with loving kindness, by dismissing her quietly. But then, the angel came, and said, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. This child she will bear, is from the Holy Spirit.” The angel asked Joseph to take Mary and her child as his own, to bear any shame that might be born by Mary or the child. The angel asked Joseph to believe what so many of us struggle to understand... that God would come and be born in an ordinary time, to an ordinary family, in some questionable circumstances. That this child is God’s sign, that God is with us. Immanuel.

The angel asked Joseph to do a “god-like” thing, to be righteous like God is righteous, to practice loving kindness like God practices loving kindness. To give Mary and her baby his name. To call her, “wife” and him, “son.” We read at the beginning of Matthew that it is through Joseph, Jesus’ adopted father that Jesus’ lineage is traced back through king David and ultimately back to father Abraham. This righteousness, this loving kindness that God offers us, is the kind of loving kindness the angel was asking Joseph to offer to Mary and her baby, It is the kind of love that says, you may not fit the mold, you may not think you measure up, you may have made a mistake, but I love you. I will protect you. I will stand up for you. I will share your shame. Fred Rogers said it this way, “Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to

accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.” God was calling Joseph to love Mary, to accept her.

That is the love that comes to us at Christmas. Love that embraces the grumpy, the fearful, the sad, the ashamed, and holds it with us. Love that gives us a sign, a child called Immanuel, “God is with us,” God’s promise that the present trouble will pass, and that God will be with us in the meantime.

On Day 13, the day after the terrible extinguishing of light, this was Peep’s prayer, “God, I feel like you know what you’re doing. So I will trust your promises.”

On Day 14: I thank you, God, for the ways you work in others’ lives with your good doings. But I also thank you for who you are—I thank you for you, God.

Day 16 (wearing an old pair of granddad’s readers): God, thank you for putting the word Christ at the beginning of Christmas to remind us what it’s all about.

And on Day 20, with 20 candles lighting up the smile of a little girl sitting on her grandma’s lap, “Thank you God for family.”

This light of love, we have kindled today, reminds us of the good name we have received because of another righteous man, who would not leave or forsake us,

but claimed us as his own, who calls us brother, sister, friend. His name is Jesus, a name he received from his dad, who received it from an angel, who received it from God. It means, "he will save us," ... from our grumpiness, our sadness, our fear, our anger, our shame. For it is he who was born to Mary and named by Joseph, who grew up to teach us, and heal us, to feed us, and give his life for us. It is he who conquered death, who reigns in power and love. It is he who prays for us and stands by us. It is he who will not forsake us. It is he who helps us to believe that God can, and will show up in the midst of our grumpiness, in the midst of our fear, in the midst of our anger, in the midst of our sadness, and say, here I am, Immanuel, God with you.

It is this name, Jesus, that is the best gift of all, for it is in his name that we have this family, it is in his name we pray, it is in his name we have hope, it is in his name that we have life. Amen.