

Sermon Notes December 18th, 2022

Scriptures

- **First Reading:** Isaiah 7:10-16
- **Psalm Reading:** Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
- **Second Reading:** Romans 1:1-7
- **Gospel Reading:** Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon

This morning, I am going to take a different route in my sermon. It is a route that I have taken before at Bay View. I just don't do it very often. Maybe, a couple times a year at the most. Normally, I choose one of the four text and that is where my sermon rests. But today, I am going to take us through a journey of all four of our readings.

We are in Advent IV. The advent season is about to end and we are now on the doorsteps of the Christmas season. The season of Advent offers the church an opportunity to reflect on its course of direction, even as we prepare for the coming of God's reign in its fulness. Maybe the timing of our Town Hall II meeting, being in the season of Advent, was very appropriate.

Our first reading this morning came from the book of Isaiah. When we look at Isaiah, we seem to see two themes that rise to the top. **They are judgment and redemption.**

The story that we heard from Isaiah is only a snapshot. There is so much that is occurring and it is something that may be helpful for us to dive deep into sometime. There are a lot of players involved in Isaiah and we will not dive deep into them but it is note-worthy to realize that Isaiah seven and eight were words to Ahaz in light of the war occurring in 734 BC.

Sometimes, when we read this passage, I think we cling onto verse fourteen and see this passage about fulfilling a wish. However, in full context, **this passage is about a call to faithfulness in the face of crisis.** Then, more importantly, it is a declaration of God's willingness to act on behalf of God's people.

God was there for Ahaz and asked him to request a sign. Ahaz wanted to do it on his own terms. I think that many would question Ahaz's thinking. There were so many dynamics that were playing out in Ahaz's community. The threats were huge and alliances in the war were shifting. He could have asked God for a sign that all would be okay. He declined. Isaiah then responded to Ahaz.

So, I go back to our Town Hall Meeting last Sunday. What would have happened if God would have shown up and interrupted our meeting and said, Bay View, ask me for a sign. What would we have done?

Maybe, a few different individuals would have stood up and said one of the following:

God, please place 250 individuals in our sanctuary for each of our Christmas Eve services?

God, can we receive enough pledge cards and pledge amounts that we will not have to cut budget?

God, there is conflict in the church, can you wipe the strife away?

I am sure that most in here would go, those three things would be great. By no means, do I object to those but are those what it means to be the people of God when the world is faced with crisis? The one thing for certain is that we need to remain faithful even amidst the crisis.

Our church and the church at large will find its truest purpose when it hears and responds to the word of God, in Jesus Christ. James Freeman says the following: The church, which was called into being by God, reaches its **greatest clarity when it sticks fast to the will of the Creator.** We, as Bay View, can do this through faithful engagement and active discernment. The big question is do we have the boldness to live into the openness of what we believe God is calling us to do even if it costs us social prominence?

As I slide us into the Psalm reading, we need to realize that the Psalm reading is reflecting back on the first reading. Ahaz was not a good king. Instead of relying on God, he relied on the Assyrians. On a quick

glance, it may seem like Ahaz was leaning into Deuteronomy where it says, “do not put your God to test.” However, close examination will show that he was using the scripture more as a shield. He was afraid what a sign from God might require of him.

Psalm 80 is a typical community lament — God is addressed and credentialed, the people’s troubles are laid out, God’s trustworthiness is rehearsed, and finally there is “the big ask.”

Are we bold enough to ask?

When I think of our requests to God, I am also reminded of the Psalm and the rawness of it. Hear the prayer again:

God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, how long will you smolder like a sleeping volcano while your people call for fire and brimstone? You put us on a diet of tears, bucket after bucket of salty tears to drink. You make us look ridiculous to our friends; our enemies poke fun day after day.

They are in a time of darkness. In Advent, we have this hope that rests in the promise that while in the darkness, we will see the light. The light is God’s light shining upon us. That light shone bright in the form of a young woman with a child.

As we continue our journey through all four scriptures, we come to our second reading. Our second reading is Paul writing to the Romans. The reading was a challenge for our reader; right? One hundred-and twenty-two-word sentence. Amazing task to try to accomplish in one breath.

In his long sentence, he is literally speaking to everyone. He speaks boldly to the Jewish and Gentile Christians. He also is speaking to those who do not identify themselves as followers of Christ. When you take the time to read through Paul’s writings, you will notice that one of his hallmark moves is to tell the story of the gospel **by using the culture and religious vocabulary of those he is speaking to.**

In addition to this he does something that intrigues me as I think back over us as a church looking at our strengths and weaknesses. Paul was very willing to lay out his insecurities in his writings. Some may that he even reached an embarrassing level of self-disclosure. However, in his openness, he speaks that God used his weakness and strengths. It truly is a faith that is genuine.

In this genuine faith, he shares with the Romans that God loves them all. We, as a church, as we look at ways to reach outside the walls of this church, we must not shy away from proclaiming the truth that God loves everyone and God desires to be in a relationship with all. May we have the courage to share that type of message. I truly believe that is a message that all are waiting to hear.

Now, we arrive. We arrive to the Gospel reading where I normally reside in for the entirety of the sermon. I promise you that I will condense the Gospel message. In the Gospel passage, Joseph is highlighted. Today’s passage, it is about the journey of Joseph.

Many theologians are annoyed **that Joseph takes the center stage** in Advent IV. Previously, the advent readings centered on the second coming of Jesus. In Advent IV, we are finally at the point where there is anticipation of Christmas and we focus on Joseph, what gives? In this passage, Joseph joins Abraham and Zechariah in receiving angelic information about impending fatherhood. Even though he is central to Advent IV in Year A, we know that in the grand sweep of Christian tradition, he is a peripheral character.

He is simply not an individual that we think of too often. He is not a man that we as a church lift up often. However, Joseph could have written Mary off and canceled the marriage. However, he did not do that. One day, he received a dream and because of that dream, he remained committed to her and the calling that placed on his heart from God.

In our bible study on Tuesday, we talked about Mary and Joseph and what they were facing. It can be fascinating when you truly sit with the story. As I sat with it for a while, I became even more intrigued.

Originally, Joseph was poised to behave ethically. He could have had her executed. However, he wanted to protect her. His plan was to dismiss her quietly. Then the dream occurred. He was then called by God to do something more righteous. God's calling was going to mean that he was going to put himself at risk. The act of remaining could bring shame to himself.

This got me thinking about myself and of course Bay View. What are we willing to risk? Do we have a ceiling where we put a limit to what ministry we are willing to do because we are afraid of what others will think?

Joseph not only models an ethic of goodness. He also models spiritual receptivity. Joseph heard from God through dreams in this text and three other times in Matthew 2. All of them about keeping Jesus safe.

In our bible study, we talked about dreams and whether people would take us seriously if we said that we felt like God was speaking to us in a dream. Many would probably think that it was more from our deeper self and not externally from God. We could then wrestle with the aspect that if our deepest self is created in the image of God then maybe dreams are God speaking to us.

We walked through all four passages today. Where does this leave us. Are we going to be like Ahaz and not ask for direction from God? Are we going to be like Joseph and be attentive to what God is speaking?

It's a risky adventure. If we attempt to listen to God, we may actually hear from God. Then, the words that we hear from God, may fundamentally alter the course of our life.

Let me end on this thought. Our Gospel reading ends with Jesus. Our attention is turned to the incarnation. Emmanuel, God is with us. This highlights the important of our faith practice of participating in worship. For after receiving the word, we come to celebrate the incarnation in the Eucharist. We will then be filled and go from this space to carry out the word to those who were not in this space. **AMEN.**