

Scripture Readings and Sermon

December 22, 2019 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 7:10-16 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Isaiah 7-11 takes place against the back drop of the Syro-Ephraimite War during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah in the 8th century BC. The kingdoms of Aram and Israel (Ephraim) called on Judah to join in their war against the Assyrian Empire but Ahaz refuse. Instead, Ahaz pledges loyalty to Assyria instead of trusting in God or at least asking for a sign. The Lord responds that a "sign" will be given and that sign shall be the birth of a new king. This announcement begins a series of prophecies about a new "king", Emmanuel, who will unite the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The Gospel of Matthew will directly reference Isaiah in when the angel spoke to Joseph in a dream. Using the Greek translation, the reference is meant to assure Joseph not only of God's blessing on the birth but that Mary was a virgin and not guilty of adultery. The Hebrew word in the texts available of Isaiah, however, can be interpreted as "virgin" but usually means "young woman". The stronger case of Mary's virginity is not in Isaiah but in Luke's conversation between Mary and Gabriel.

Commentary on Romans 1:1-7 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Paul begins his letter to the Romans affirming that he is not a free man. The word often translated as "servant" in Greek means slave. Paul was bought with a price and that price was Jesus Christ. His "master" has called him to go forth (apostle) to proclaim the good news (gospel) of God. This good news is that the promises recorded in the Hebrew writings (Old Testament) have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus who is both the Messiah of God and the Lord of humanity. Lord of humanity according to his royal blood line of David and Messiah of God because of his spirit of holiness revealed at his resurrection. It is only through Jesus that God's grace and peace is given by faith and obedience. All of this is to explain why Paul declares that he is a slave to Jesus.

Commentary on Matthew 1:18-25 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

At the time of Jesus, the custom of Jewish marriage occurred in two stages: engagement and wedding. When the engagement was settled upon between the groom and the bride's father often with the bride's consent, then in the eyes of Jewish law the couple was married. The actual wedding may be delayed depending upon the age of the bride and the ability of the groom to provide an acceptable home. This sets the stage for Matthew's story of Jesus' birth. If Mary was found to be pregnant before the wedding, she would have been found guilty of adultery and subject to stoning because in the eyes of the law she was already married. This is why Joseph was going to "dismiss her quietly". It is also why, in Luke, Mary went to visit Elizabeth in another village. The angel's visit to Joseph not only affirms that Mary's birth is according to God's will but provides for Jesus' childhood. It is also of interest to note that just as Joseph adopted Jesus, it is through Jesus that humanity would be adopted as heirs to God's kingdom.

Sermon "God Is With Us" (*[Sermon Video](#)*)

Driving into work the other day, I was again struck by the beauty of God's creation. The birds in the air and the cattle grazing as the morning sun sparkles on the morning dew. All of these things remind me that God is always with us. I guess that is why I prefer Pastor as apposed to Reverend which is my correct title. A Reverend belongs in a big church in the city where as a Pastor is out in the country. No pretensions or trappings but rather a simple and honest message of faith, hope, and love. In creation, the pure simplicity of God with us for me is much easier to see and hear. Even so, there are times when that simplicity seems to be blown away by the unexpected complexities of life.

I wonder if that is how Joseph felt when he found out that Mary was pregnant. In those days,

once you were betrothed you were married. How long they had been betrothed, the scriptures do not tell us but we do know that Joseph cared enough about Mary that he was unwilling to expose her "infidelity" to the rest of the community. Still, to find out that the woman you are engaged to is pregnant by someone else can turn a person's world upside down in a hurry. Life can become complicated in a hurry and it is during those times that it becomes hard realize that God is still with us. Like Joseph, we have all be thrown a curve ball by life at one time or another. Sometimes it can simply be that life becomes too busy to handle but at other times we get sucker punched. It is during those times that we need God the most but feel him the least. It is during these times that we need to hear that God is with us and God will make a way.

For Ahaz, he needed the prophet Isaiah to remind him that God was with him. But still, Ahaz refused to let God show him a way so the Lord said that he would send a sign. A young unmarried women, a virgin, would conceive and bare a son who would be called Emmanuel. Sometimes, in the confusion of life, we need a sign pointing us in the right direction. Then again, some of us are so stubborn that we refuse to ask for directions and need some direct intervention. We need an angel to come to us in a dream and tell us it will all work out or maybe we simply need a friend to call and remind us that we are not alone. It doesn't matter how God gets our attention, the question is, "Why does God need to try so hard to get our attention?"

For Christians, God is always with us in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Jesus left us the Holy Spirit and told us that he would be with us until the end of the age. Even on our darkest nights, the light of Christ shines in our hearts with hope and peace if we have the faith to trust it. I think that is why I like the Statement of Faith from the United Church of Canada that we say in December. It ends with "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God." God is with us every day knocking at the door of our hearts if we would just listen to his call.

Paul heard the call and it changed his life. When Paul opened his heart to Jesus, the grace and peace of God flowed into his life with such force that he felt sent to spread the word of Emmanuel. The gulf of sin that separated us from God is gone for God is with us. No longer separated by legal categories or regional distinctions, in Jesus, the fullness of God came in flesh to bind us together in love. All are called to the Christ child's manger to know in their hearts that God is with us. God has made a way for all to belong and all to come home. That way is Jesus for Jesus is Emmanuel.