

4TH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

DECEMBER 22, 2013

HOPE FOR TODAY

Pastor Jim Dunn

Isaiah 7:10-14

The Sign of Immanuel

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, **11** "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." **12** But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." **13** And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? **14** Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Matthew 1:18-25

The Birth of Jesus Christ

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. **20** But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." **22** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel!"

(Which means, God with us). **24** When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25** but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

It was back at the beginning of this college football season. Michigan was not yet getting out the snowplows. It was Saturday afternoon in East Lansing, September 7th, and the Michigan State faithful were already in their seats awaiting the kickoff between South Florida and their beloved Spartans.

Then, a line of thunderstorms approached East Lansing, and the stadium was evacuated because of the imminent threat of lightning. While most of the fans heeded orders and left the stadium, the Michigan State student section was reluctant to leave. In fact, they did not budge. While the rest of the stadium was now empty, that one section of the stadium seating was still jammed pack with students from the bottom row to the top of the stadium. It was the second weather evacuation in as many weeks at Spartan Stadium, and the previous week in the game against Western Michigan, many students didn't leave.

So, this time, Tom Izzo, the school's super popular basketball coach, went out onto the field, right in front of the student section. With microphone in hand, he began to address the students. He promised that if they left the stadium, he would sit with them during the game when everyone was allowed to return. "I'm going to be right in the middle of you!" Izzo said. "Ya gotta understand something that's really important to me, and that's *all of you!* Come on guys! I love you! Thank you so much for doing this! And I'll see you back here in 30 minutes."

There was a problem, and Tom Izzo saw that the students were not going to come up with the solution. The only solution was for someone from outside of the student body to come and be with them and to promise to remain among them.

The world at the time of the prophets was in a similar predicament. The Hebrew prophets could see how deep the world's problems were, and they could see that the world was not going to fix itself. When Ahaz was king of Judah, the empire of the greedy Assyrians was growing.

But in tiny Syria and in tiny Israel and in tiny Judah they could not see the danger they were in. They could not see the thunderstorm that was coming. Tiny Syria and tiny Israel were plotting war against puny Judah. The only solution that King Ahaz could come up with was to make an alliance with the greedy Assyrians.

The Lord warned Ahaz not to make this alliance. He spoke to Ahaz through His microphone, His mouthpiece, the prophet Isaiah. He tried to talk Ahaz out of this dangerous alliance. He offered Ahaz a sign that God would be with Judah. "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or high as heaven." (Isaiah 7:11) But Ahaz turned God down. "I will not ask," he said. Clearly, *in that case* the solution was not in the room. The world was not going to fix itself.

God offered a solution from outside our world. He promised that He Himself would come and be with this world and sit among us. "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Which means, God with us.

It was the only solution. The Lord is still our world's only hope. That makes us anxious.

"To hear the phrase 'our only hope' always makes people anxious, because it means that if the only hope doesn't work, there is nothing left." (Pfatteicher)

That is perhaps the very thing that makes us anxious about Advent, that makes us want to move on quickly, along with the rest of the world, and get to the warm glow of Christmas. Advent is dark and silent and cold. Advent is so honest. Advent is not afraid to say that things are bleak. We are buried, groaning beneath sorrow's load. The deep blue of Advent reminds us of the color of the sky at the last light of day, when the sunlight is almost gone. The deep blue of Advent says that the only hope for this world is a promise made by God, while a quiet voice whispers in our ears, "Maybe you are mistaken."

So, we look to our government to protect us from evil and to protect us from foreign enemies. But we realize there is so much war and violence right here in our own schools and workplaces. Like Ahaz, we trust the strength of our alliances with loved ones and the bank, our retirement pension, and our insurance policies. Then, we panic when these alliances cannot protect us.

Yet, the Lord is, if anything, persistent. His offer of a sign was turned down by one son of David (King Ahaz), so He would turn to another son of David, named Joseph, and offer again the sign that He will be with His people. “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

With that sign and promise Joseph was stirred to a hope no one could have predicted. When Joseph woke from his dream, “he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...” Even though that culture looked down on any man who placed his love for his wife above his honor, instead of divorcing Mary quietly, Joseph stayed with Mary.

God came to stay with us. He came to be with us and promised to remain with us, to abide with us, to dwell with us, to stay with us. (Matthew 28:20)

One year ago, last Advent season; just two weeks before Christmas, an accident occurred in West Valley City, Utah. Twenty-four-year-old Aryann Smith was crossing a street when a city bus suddenly struck her. She got pinned beneath the bus, both of her legs crushed. The first police officer on the scene was Kevin Peck. He said that when he arrived all he could see was Aryann Smith's white shoe sticking out from under the bus. Assessing the situation quickly, he discovered the woman had suffered severe injuries. So, he placed his body under the bus on the icy ground in order to take her pulse. He took her hand to check her pulse, and after he did that he held onto her hand and didn't let go until fire crews were able to lift the bus off of her and pull her out. “She was very scared,” he said. “I told her I would stay...”

Jesus, the Son of God, this world's only hope, who has promised to return in His resurrection body on the Last Day, came to this world, **and He stayed**. He laid Himself down beneath the crushing weight of our sins and their consequences, and He did not leave. He stayed. He stayed to pour His life into our death. He stayed to heal our wounds. He stayed to comfort our fears. After His resurrection and Ascension, He stays through His Word and Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

We are stirred to a hope that no one would predict.

Our Hope today, which is the only Hope for this world, is the One who is with us, right in the middle of us through His Word and Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Our Hope for today is the same as the One who was our help in ages past.

Our Hope for today is the same One who will be our Hope for years and eternity to come.

Our Hope for today is the One who is with us and who will return in His body to come and stay with us and dwell with us bodily, and we will dwell with Him bodily.

So what about the deep blue of Advent? Is it blue edging into black? Is it blue edging into the black of night and darkness?

Or, is it black edging into blue with the promise, **"The night is nearly over; the day is almost here"!** (Romans 13:12)

Amen