

12/18/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WORDS OF WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

It's the fourth Sunday of Advent – we're almost there! The anticipation is mounting and if you know any children the excitement is palpable. But I'm not ready! Are you ready? My guest beds don't have clean sheets on them yet. I haven't cleaned up that particularly messy corner in the basement yet. I haven't been able to have the conversations I was hoping for that might help to repair some of the broken relationships in my life. I haven't given as much time as I wanted to, to help end poverty in Marion County. The Earth is still hurtling toward the destruction of climate change and I haven't put solar panels on my house yet, or sent enough messages to my legislators... I haven't even learned how to make yogurt yet so I can quit buying all those plastic tubs! I'm definitely not ready yet to welcome the baby Jesus.

And this is precisely the world into which God sent Jesus. A world that's far from ready, longing to be restored, set right, made whole. Welcome to this time of worship as we praise God, remember God's faithfulness and cry out for God to come, again, into our world, into each of our needs and realities.

What are the opportunities to serve and celebrate that we have to share with one another?

Call to Worship

Leader: Into this longest night

All: Emmanuel – God with us

Leader: Into our broken world

Into this space and this time

Into our loneliness and our fear

Into the world you love

All: Emmanuel – God with us

Prayer – Thank you God, for your love, for your presence with us. Bless our time of worship, we pray and give to each one what is needed for today. Amen.

Before Lee and Mary Alice come to light the candles, I invite you to listen to the song “Restore Us” by the Soil and the Seed Project. It's about 4 minutes long and there are lots of words – that Delton will kindly put up, on the screen. The style of the music is unusual for us, so... hold on. I wanted to play this song because I think they did a great job of weaving together contemporary situations (their own experiences of grief and faith) with the biblical story of Joseph (the one with all the brothers and the technicolor coat, not Mary's Joseph) and then the

arrival of the baby Jesus. And they tie it all together in the refrain with Psalm 80, verse 7 – asking God to restore us.

MORNING PRAYER -- USING PSALM 80 – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Adoration

God our Shepherd,

You who sit enthroned between the galaxies, whose light reflects off of the morning frost.

We give you our praise. You are as near as the breath we see in the still, cold air. In your mystery, we give you our trust.

You are God-with-us. You were born into our world of travail as a vulnerable child.

You gave us Jesus – the promised one who came to save your people from our sins.

Teach us, O God, to receive this gift that we celebrate at Christmas like children who await the day with enthusiasm as they count down the days.

Christmas is a week away. Some of us eagerly anticipate our gatherings to celebrate, and others wish for it to quickly be over, especially those who carry heavy burdens and grief.

We confess that many of us are weathered by the losses, wounds, and griefs of life. Our well of praise and joy has run dry.

We are approaching the longest night. We are still waiting for restoration in many ways.

How long, God Almighty? How long will so many people near or far have only bread of tears to eat? When will you hear your people's prayers?

God, we wait for your restoration in our lives and in our world. Revive us so that we may call on your name.

Let us know that you are Immanuel – God with us.

Let us know your presence in the spaces where we feel weighed down by brokenness, anxiety, or overwhelm. Help us to remember your nearness.

Reveal where we can be part of your restoring work.

We continue to pray for healing for those who are struggling with the many viruses and other illness of this fall season.

We pray for Dan Bergen as is cared for at Wesley Medical Center. We ask for comfort and healing for Dan and for wisdom for doctors and for Dan's family as they learn more and make choices about treatment.

We pray for all those in schools in the final stretch of the fall semester, anticipating Christmas break. May they end the semester well and find space to give attention to your unfailing love.

In our world, we pray for places dealing with destructive weather conditions. We remember folks in the Dakotas hunkering down from the blizzard. We pray for all those who do not have adequate shelter as we anticipate frigid weather this coming week.

We pray for those places in the world dealing the most with climate uncertainty.

We pray for folks in Iran, Peru and Haiti who are championing and working for human rights and receiving prison time or threats of death as a result.

Awaken your might, Lord, come and save those who are on the side of love.

Teach us to wait for your restoration in hopeful expectation. Let us be neither aloof from pain or despairing, but people who are alive to both joy and suffering. People who open ourselves to be clay vessels of your incarnate love.

Restore us, O God, make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God, you are our strength and our salvation. We have no reason to fear, for you are with us, Immanuel. Our hope is built on your unfailing love.

We dedicate the gifts offered today in the hope that you will work through them.

May you be glorified and your name be praised as we prepare our hearts to receive you. Amen

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS

Hope against all the evidence

Since the Matthew passage is so familiar, I'm going to spend a little more time with the Isaiah text – and then look at the two together.

Ahaz, the king of Judah was having a foreign policy crisis and Isaiah the prophet was trying to get him through it. In the verses just preceding our text we hear the writer reminding us of who Ahaz is... Verse 1 – "In the days of Ahaz, son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, King of Judah... of the house of David." It's as if Isaiah is saying to Ahaz, Hey. Remember who you are. Remember the long line of faithful kings and leaders from whom you are descended. Ahaz needed this little pep talk because he was afraid – and all of the people with him. They were afraid because they

were a tiny tribe and the kings of the two nations to the north of them had become allies against them. They were threatening to mount an attack on Jerusalem, the capitol city of Judah. Ahaz and the people were terrified – if this attack was successful it would be the end of them and also the end of God’s promise that a descendant of David would always be king. Isaiah’s counsel to Ahaz is to **trust God!** Even though these two other kings have allied against you, Isaiah says to Ahaz, you need to “take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands...” What great imagery!

In a nutshell, the prophet’s counsel to the king in the midst of this crisis was three-fold. First remember rightly. Remember, you *are* the king. And you are descended from the Davidic line. And also, you are the king of a tiny tribe who will not prevail against virtually any other military presence. And so, second, stay calm. Be quiet outwardly and inwardly, don’t be afraid and don’t fight or respond with anger or violence. And most importantly, stand strong on your faith. Remember how God has led your people in the past and trust that God will do it again.

Apparently Ahaz wasn’t really convinced because in verse 10 where our text takes up today, the voices of Isaiah and God get amalgamated into one as they both try to encourage Ahaz. Yahweh challenges Ahaz by telling him to ask for a sign of God’s faithfulness. Any sign! It could be as high as the heavens or as low as Sheol – you ask for it and I’ll deliver, God says. But Ahaz rejects God’s offer with a response that reveals his fear and lack of trust. He replies with this flimsy attempt at pious religiosity when he says he won’t ask for a sign because he doesn’t want to test God. The prophet jumps in, annoyed by King Ahaz’s fear and lack of faith. He declares his prophetic word: Your “sign” is the birth of a child. And by the time this child is born and weaned the threat against Jerusalem will have passed.

It’s important to understand Isaiah in his own history and context. In this time of national threat and fear, he was making the point that within a relatively short period of time – the time it would take for a child to be born, weaned and “know how to refuse the evil and choose the good,” which likely meant the ability to choose between edible and inedible food so, perhaps 3 or 4 years – in that amount of time Jerusalem and Judah would no longer be under threat of invasion. Isaiah likely noticed a young, pregnant woman standing there in the crowd and decided to use her as his illustration. He pointed her out, and made the observation that something as “usual” as the birth of a child can bring the hope of God’s miraculous presence with us. And so, he prophesied, the young woman will name her child Immanuel – which means “God is with us”.

It’s not hard to see why the writer of Matthew used this passage from Isaiah to talk about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth – even though there was about 700 years in between. The writer of Matthew, like the prophet Isaiah, was looking for signs of God’s presence with us.

As we meet up with Joseph in the gospel story he’s also having a sort of crisis – it’s more personal than Ahaz’s crisis, but like Ahaz, Joseph is scared. The woman to whom he’s engaged to be married says she’s pregnant, but Joseph knows it’s not his baby. In that culture, this could mean the end of Mary by destroying her reputation, for sure, but it was also possible that she

could be killed. And this situation certainly wouldn't do him any good either. Like Ahaz, Joseph was probably feeling the threat of an imminent attack. Joseph's pep talk came from an angel rather than a prophet. But the instructions were remarkably similar.

First, remember who you are – Joseph, son of David. You are in the line of the Davidic household, don't forget. And... keep it humble; you are also a poor peasant who lives under the oppressive iron fist of the Roman Empire.

Second, stay calm, be quiet, outwardly and inwardly. Don't be afraid. The Spirit of God is in this situation. This child will be born as a sign of God's presence in the world.

And third, stand strong on your faith. Trust that God is present with you.

The situations that both Ahaz and Joseph found themselves in were confusing and frightening and must have felt somewhat hopeless – as if there was no good way out of it.

When is the last time you felt that way? We all have those times – when we're worried or scared, when it seems like there are just no good options for moving forward, when we don't know how or what to pray or when we just can't seem to find God in a situation.

This is the human predicament. And so, it's our job to look for the signs – to look for hope against all the evidence that tells us it's hopeless.

The signs are often right in front of us. Daily miracles that we take for granted – our breath, our health, loved ones, new-born babies.

I still have time to get my house ready. I need to seek out opportunities to mend broken relationships. I can keep working at the problem of poverty in Marion County. Those legislators sometimes change, but whoever is in those positions still needs to hear from me – from us. I still have time to learn how to make yogurt and to take better care of the earth. And as I reach out and make some of those efforts, I can see glimpses of God with me in that work.

How 'bout you? Where are the situations or experiences that make you feel stuck or scared or hopeless – like there's just no good option moving forward? How can you look for signs that God is in those situations? Remember who you are. A beloved child of God, gifted, created in God's image. Stay calm. Be quiet. Don't be afraid. Stand firm on your faith. Trust that God is present with you. He comes to us in surprising, ordinary ways. Immanuel. God is with us.

BENEDICTION – PASTOR LOIS

Go out in hope, courageously trusting in God's promise to be *with* us!