

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which means, God with us” (Matt 1:23).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

When God comes for you with His gifts, what does He want from you?

Well, the answer is simple: He wants you to receive the gifts! That’s it!

He wants you to come with your empty, helpless hands and your fearful, troubled hearts to receive what He wants to give you.

And what, exactly, is it that God wants you to have?

Again, the answer is clear: He has promised to give you Immanuel – Christ Himself –

God with you who gives you the victory over your enemies and saves you from sin and death.

And I hope you will agree, this is a pretty great gift!

For you and I, like Ahaz, are surrounded by the enemy.

Death is inevitable – always has been since we lost that first battle in the Garden of Eden.

But “the LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in

battle" (Psa 24:8) has promised to deliver you, like Ahaz, from your enemies and to give you the victory for life everlasting in His kingdom. Amen!

Which brings us back to that Advent question, "O Lord, how shall we meet You, how welcome you aright?"

How shall we meet Immanuel when He comes to deliver us from evil and to give us the victory over sin, grief, and all the terrors we experience along the way to our inevitable, everlasting death?

Again, the answer is simple:

You either take hold of the gifts He gives, or you don't...

As you come face to face with your great peril at the hands of the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh,

you either put your fear, love, and trust in God to save you, as Joseph did,

or you put your fear, love, and trust in your idols, which is the path Ahaz chose.

When Isaiah wrote the words of our OT reading this morning, things were not going well for God's people.

From the time of their prosperity under David and Solomon, they had made a lot of bad decisions,

had a lot of bad kings,

heard a lot of bad preaching, and in brief,

were now in a bad way.

10 of the 12 tribes had split off and gone their own way to the north,

and now they had linked up with Syria to attack Jerusalem and be done with Judah once for all.

Ahaz, who was king of Judah at the time, was terrified!

And rightly so!

The problem is, Ahaz was not a God-fearing man.

In fact, he was himself a wicked king who had no intention of calling on the Lord in his time of greatest need.

And yet, even while he was still a vile, despicable sinner, God came for him – just like He comes for you and me and the “old Ahaz” in all of us –

He sent Isaiah with words of encouragement telling him not to be afraid, but to repent and put his trust in the Lord who had now come to his rescue.

In fact, God even offered to seal His promise with a sign:

“Ask a sign of the LORD your God;

let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven (v11).”

All God wanted from Ahaz was for him to receive the gift of salvation, and not only salvation,

but also this sign that would give him comfort and confident hope as he awaited his deliverance.

And what does Ahaz do? He blows Him off!

He says, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test” (v12).

Now, that may sound like a pious response, but the fact is,

Ahaz didn't NEED any more signs
because he had his idols!

He had things all figured out.

In fact, by this point, he had
already worked out a deal with the king of Assyria to protect him from his
enemies, which is to say,

he had put his fear, love, and trust in himself and in the
“princes” of this world.

He had no use for this messenger of
God or this Word of promise,

but instead forged ahead on his own
– to his own demise.

For in the end, things did not go well for Ahaz.

The Assyrians ultimately crushed the
kingdom as the instrument of God's wrath, which is to say,

God does indeed come to sinners,
like it or not!

And if you refuse to have the gifts He gives, then you will
have the wrath He pours out.

But if you will meet Him in your
time of trouble with ears open to His Word and hands outstretched to receive
the gifts He gives,

then you will indeed have His
deliverance – His Immanuel –

which is the path Joseph chose.

In our well-known Gospel reading
this morning, Joseph was in a world of hurt...

And yes, the text is subtle, but
think about it –

You're engaged, you've got your whole life together ahead of
you,

and suddenly your beloved bride is unmasked as an
adulteress.

Not only do you feel like a dupe,
and not only are your hopes and dreams brought to ruin,

but now you have to decide whether
to take the hit and leave her quietly,

or have her stoned for adultery!

How do you decide? Who will you turn
to?

Will you turn to your idols in the place of God who provides
all things?

Will you act in self-righteousness in the place of Christ
who justifies sinners?

Will you determine what's true and best for you in the place
of the Holy Spirit who reveals all truth?

In other words, will you put your
fear, love, and trust in Me, Myself, and I?

Or will you hear and believe the
Word of God's messenger who says,

"Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is
conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Mat 1:20)?

It seems like a no-brainer,

but you know as well as I do that this is a difficult and

daily battle when the devil is always there with his “competitive word,”

continually at work to turn you back to yourself for the answers, back to your self-righteous pride,

back to your reason and senses...

“Did God REALLY say ‘conceived from the Holy Spirit?

Don’t you KNOW where babies come from?

Virgins don’t have kids! Wise up! Ditch her!

Use your head! Think about your future!

Think about your good name, and about what people will say about you...”

Which way do you go, with the devil, or with the messenger of God’s Word –

with the culture and the world and your reason and senses, or with the promise, “Do not fear... You shall call His name Jesus, for he will save His people from their sins” (Mat 1:21)?

It is the decision you make in the face of every temptation –

a decision you sometimes make wisely, and sometimes not...

Joseph chose well.

“He took his wife... and he called the child’s name Jesus” (Mat 1:25). Why?

Because God came to him!

God sent His messenger with His Word of Promise!

God created the very faith by which
Joseph repented, turned from the devil and his idols,
and put his fear, love, and trust in
God alone.

And so he did the only thing God wanted him to do...

He received the gift through faith in His Word.

And so, I guess the question is,
which way will you go, the way of Ahaz or the way of Joseph?

The answer, of course, is YES -

For we are simultaneously Ahaz and Joseph - we are at the
same time saint and sinner,

and so we *do* choose poorly, even though we *know*
the better way -

which is why come here today...

We come in repentance, turning back
to that "better Way," for we know what God wants:

We know He wants us to receive His
Word and His gracious Promise.

We know He wants us to receive His gift of rescue and new
life.

We know He wants us to receive Immanuel, God with US who
gives US His victory over sin, death, and hell.

Which is why, as God comes for us
today, we meet Him in repentance with the prayer, "Lord, have mercy!" that we
may receive His forgiveness.

We meet Him in our need with the song of "Hosanna - Lord

Save” on our lips, that we may receive His salvation.

We meet Him with our fears, that He may fill us with gladness and joy.

Lift up your heads, O gates, and pray,

“Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might,

that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy” –

That is, after all, why He came.

In the Name of Jesus, our Immanuel. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon Texts: Isaiah

7:10-17; Matt 1:18-25