

Love Is With Us

Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

Farmville Baptist Church

December 18, 2022

If you ever wondered if you matter in life, have some kids, then put them to bed – and wait until about 1 or 2 in the morning. My experience, and I can only speak from my experience, is that sometime during the night, sometimes earlier, sometimes later, on occasion not at all, but usually around 1 or 2, my children wake up and decide that they need Mommy or Daddy. My son shows up in our room like clockwork and climbs into bed. He's really quiet about it – Cadance and I have the nightly shock of waking up to Jonathan looming over us. Phoebe isn't quite at that stage, but she does often wake up in the night and want Cadance to come and sleep with her in her bed. Apparently ~~one~~ ^{one} night

this
week

she was roaming the hall in our home asking where Mommy was. If you ever wondered if your presence mattered, just have some young children and wait till the middle of the night – you'll find out that in their half-awake confusion and the shadows of the night, being physically present is the most important thing in the world to them.

Aren't we all like that, though? When life is at it's toughest, when we have more on our plate than we can handle, when the fears and doubts within us rise, we just want our people, or really our person, to be there with us. Now, it can take all sorts of forms: a long hug, a movie night on the couch, a day in a boat with a fishing pole in hand, a shopping trip into town. And we may want our person to talk through our problem or talk about anything ~~else~~ ^{but our problem} or just stay quiet – but when life is the most overwhelming, most of

us really want someone, especially that *particular* one, to be there with us.

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah, we take a look back through history at a time when God's people were terrified – and rightly so. During the reign of King Ahaz, the people of the kingdom of Judah were under existential threat. The Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had split off from Judah several generations before, was trying to work the geopolitical angles – and Judah was in the crosshairs. Amidst the constantly-shifting web of alliances in the region, Israel joined forces with Syria to attack Jerusalem and replace King Ahaz with a puppet ruler.

Now, Ahaz will never be found at the top of anyone's list of great kings of the Bible. He ruled for 16 years or so, and his son Hezekiah was legitimately a good king, but Ahaz himself was not particularly faithful to God and, when in a

tight spot, he gave away some of the valuable artifacts from the Temple to get a foreign king to protect his people. When we meet him in the passage today, he and his people are in the worst place ^{possible;} ~~the~~ ~~city~~ besieged by hostile forces and with no viable escape. Jerusalem is surrounded by the armies of Israel and Syria, and Ahaz's people have no way to break the siege. The mood within the walls of Jerusalem was despondent, and the king had no more reason to hope than anyone else. The end was coming – everyone just knew it – and there was nothing but the fear of the unknown on the other side.

It was at this moment that the prophet Isaiah showed up. We know that Isaiah had an interesting relationship with the king: he was an advisor, respected by the faithful of Jerusalem and given insight by God that could help the king; but Isaiah, like any good prophet, wasn't beholden to the

king. He was a prophet of God, and a prophet of God spoke the truth about the covenant faithfulness of God and God's people. Sometimes, that was a word of comfort, a reassurance that God was upholding his end of the agreement. But other times, a prophet's role was to tell the people of God, especially those responsible for leading the people, that they were straying from the path – and that such straying might not end so well. This didn't endear prophets to kings and priests that weren't the most devout or pious, like Ahaz. A prophet like Isaiah could be a thorn in the side or a burr under the saddle: a constant, irritating reminder that, no matter how rich or powerful the king was, they were failing in the eternal estimation of God, and that could not work out too well for them or for their people.

So when Isaiah walks up to the king, it's highly unlikely that Ahaz was thrilled.

But Isaiah has good news for the king: God is with you, with us, with Judah. The two armies facing us – they will not conquer. The two kings threatening us – they are going to have bigger problems to face. This siege won't last forever. It won't even last for very much longer, not in the grand scheme of things. Look, there's a young woman here who is pregnant. By the time her child is born and has grown old enough to reason, to know right and wrong, to interact with his world, he'll be eating curds and honey. He'll be eating, not the food necessary for survival, like you'd have to eat during a siege. Instead, he'll be eating the delicacies, the sweet and satisfying treats of life. He's your sign, Ahaz, that things will get better. He's your sign that God is with us – so his name will be Immanuel. His name will be "God is with us."

Now, I don't know if that news, that sign, brought much comfort to King Ahaz. Like I said, he wasn't the most devout king to begin with; he might have refused to draw comfort in a promise from a prophet of God who often took him to task. But in that moment, when all hope seemed lost and the cynics within the walls of Jerusalem said that God had abandoned his people, in that moment the faithful of God's people needed some sign that God was still with them. They couldn't tell it on the battlefield, where they were hopelessly outmatched. They couldn't tell it in their streets, with the gates of the city shut for everyone's protection. And they couldn't tell it in their own homes, as the food on the table at each meal became less and the anxieties and fears of each conversation grew. They could only tell it in the depths of their souls, where they rehearsed how God had faithfully sustained his people in the past and where they held onto

hope for future deliverance by the slimmest of threads.

Those people, the faithful of God suffering in Jerusalem under siege, needed to know that God was still with them – and now the prophet of God gives them a concrete, flesh-and-blood sign that he is.

Sometimes, we need that assurance as well. We may not be facing hordes of enemy soldiers besieging our city, but we face all sorts of struggles in life – struggles with health, struggles with work, struggles with family, struggles with money, struggles with our own souls. And though we all face these struggles and trials, many of which are similar if not identical to those of the people around us, we can feel all alone in our pain, in our heartache, in our uncertain fear.

More than anything, we need to know that someone is with us, someone who cares for us – ^{because} somehow, knowing that we are not alone in our suffering can ease it immensely, or at least make it easier to bear.

God knows that is a fundamental need of the human heart. He knows it because it is how he made us – he created us as people of relationship, the creatures most like him who walked with him in the Garden and who still bear his image, flawed though we are. And so God, through the prophet Isaiah, promised a sign so that his people would know that he was with them in their fear and their pain.

But then God went ~~farther~~ *further*.

In the book of Matthew, labeled “good news” by the early church, a man named Joseph receives a message from an angel. His fiancée, Mary, is pregnant – but pregnant in an unusual way. She is bearing, not the son of a human father, but the very son of God. “For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,”¹ he is told. And this child is more than a sign; this child is a savior. “You are to name him Jesus” –

¹ Mt. 1:20

which means ‘God saves’ – “for he will save his people from their sins.”² Somehow, amid our destitution and despair, amid our own sinfulness and separation from God, amid our self-imposed isolation, whether consciously chosen or not, God comes among us to save us. It isn’t always salvation from an external threat, as it was for Ahaz and Isaiah and their Jerusalem. More often, it is salvation from our own flaws and faults, our own harmful choices and decisions that keep us withdrawn and alone amid our great need. To channel the Gospel of John, Jesus is God putting on flesh and blood and moving into the neighborhood, dwelling with us, joining us in the dark corners and rock bottoms of our lives.

Karoline Lewis, a professor of preaching and a New Testament scholar at Luther Seminary, says that salvation is

² Mt. 1:21

God's presence – and God's presence takes away sin, stops the separation between us and God, and allows God to draw near to us in our great need.³ The salvation Jesus brings, indeed the salvation Jesus embodies with his very physical presence in the world, is seen by Matthew to fulfill what Isaiah had first spoken: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”⁴ Somehow, the coming of Jesus, son of Mary, is the perfect fulfillment of God with us.

But why would he do that? Why would God become a child, and then a man, to live among sinful human beings, people who hurt others and are hurt in turn, people who suffer unexpectedly and who lash out at the God who made them in their pain, people who aspire to the heavens yet fail

³ Inspired by Karoline Lewis, in commentary during the Working Preacher podcast for 12/18/2022
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzAWEi3wIMU>)

⁴ Matthew 1:23

time and time again? Why would God become Jesus, become, literally, “God-with-us”?

Because, quite simply, God loves us.

In the Torah, the earliest parts of the Hebrew Bible, we find God held up as a God of steadfast love, who moved heaven and earth to save his people from the lash of Pharaoh’s whip and bring them to the Promised Land.

In the prophets, we find proclamations of God’s love for human beings over and over, like Jeremiah’s record of God’s statement, “I have loved you with an everlasting love”⁵ and Isaiah reminding the people of God in exile, “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not be removed from you.”⁶

The Gospels record Jesus himself declaring God’s love for us, most memorably in the verse that begins, “For God so

⁵ Jeremiah 31:3

⁶ Isaiah 54:10

loved the world...”⁷ And the rest of the New Testament bears this out, with 1 John going so far as to say, “God is love”⁸ and “we love because he first loved us.”⁹

God came to be with us, in the person of Jesus Christ, because, quite simply, he loves us. And that love leads him to sit with us in our despair, stand with us in our struggles, and bring salvation to us in the face of our sin, our pain, our heartache, and our confusion when life grows dark, difficult, and desperate.

Perhaps, as Joseph heard the angel’s voice in his sleep, his mind wandered back to the words of the prophet Zephaniah. Like Isaiah, Zephaniah wrote words of comfort to the people of Jerusalem during a time of strife. Writing in the days of King Ahaz’s great-grandson, Josiah, the prophet

⁷ John 3:16

⁸ 1 John 4:16

⁹ 1 John 4:19

reassures the people, “The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”¹⁰ “~~He~~ ^{He} will quiet you by his love.”

Another translation says, “With his love, he will calm all your fears.”¹¹ Joseph stirred from his sleep knowing that the God he worshipped, that his ancestors worshipped, was a God who loved his people, and who would not leave them to face the struggles of life alone. Instead, he would be with them, supporting them, encouraging them, stepping in to make things right, and saving his people in any number of ways. Now, with the son of his betrothed, Joseph would see that character trait of God brought to literal, flesh-and-blood life – and it would change the world.

¹⁰ Zephaniah 3:17, ESV

¹¹ Zephaniah 3:17, NLT

It still does, today. My friends, life can be tough. It can be painful. It can be scary. It can overwhelm us, and fill us with anxiety, fear, and suffering. When it does, we don't have to face those pains and hurts and fears alone – because there is someone who loves us. There is someone who loves us so much that he chooses to be with us, on our best day, but also on our worst. There is someone who loves us so much that he saves us from the ravages of sickness, from the despair of grief, from the uncertainty of the future, and the trap of our own sin – not just by what he has done, but even more by where he is. He is with us. He is Immanuel.

As we turn this week from the season of waiting that is Advent to the season of joy that is Christmas, let us take comfort and hope from the fundamental truth of the Christmas story: love is here, and it's here to stay. The good

news of Christmas is this: God is with us, for Jesus is the fulfillment of Immanuel.

Celebrations

- * Proud of Dr. Gordon
- * Kathryn Copeland
- * Burrisses

Concerns

- * Bill Layne (Pam's dad)
- * Pam's friend Belinda
- * Travellers