

Seeds of Hope

As we have been reading from the Isaiah scroll for several Sundays it always strikes me as despite the wonderful images they contain, it is somewhat strange to so strictly separate them from the major message coming from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah of Jerusalem is called upon by God to proclaim judgment; to criticize the behaviors of the elite of Jerusalem and its rules for just about everything including their hypocritical worship. The political situation of the nation is precarious, Judah having been separated from the larger nation of Israel whose king has designs on regaining the land. The passage for today is based on that situation as Israel and other surrounding nations are laying siege in preparation of removing Ahaz from his throne. Ahaz is busily scheming to retain his throne and status by trying to form an alliance with an even bigger political force in the region...the king of Assyria. Isaiah comes to him warning that this will result in disaster. Instead of pursuing his own path to solve the dilemma, Isaiah tells him he should trust in God's promise to his ancestor David and trust in that protection. Through Isaiah, Ahaz is told to ask for a sign which can be as "deep as Sheol or as high as heaven" showing God's presence with and for Judea. Ahaz cannot bring himself to trust in God and so even refuses to ask for a sign claiming piously that he "will not put God to the test." Ahaz is told that even though he has refused to ask for a sign God is going to provide a sign, a young boy child, a son who will be named Immanuel. It is lost to history as to who the young woman was or who or what the son born to her did in his time in the 8th century, but the first seeds of hope came in the name he was to be given: Immanuel which means God with you. God's promise to be with is always the promise which brings hope into the darkest of times. The issue at stake here is whether or not Ahaz can or will trust in God. That is often the main issue in our lives as well. Do we trust that God is with us as we encounter problems in our lives? Do we prayerfully bring our dilemmas to the Lord; seeking answers in Jesus' words? Or do we like Ahaz turn to other solutions and paths not found in our scriptures or Jesus' teachings? In our world, like that of Ahaz it is so much easier to trust in alliances and arms and investments and securities than in God. Ahaz's invitation to Assyria was accepted but brought violence and destruction bot to Ahaz and Judah. And of course, the truth of God with us is that when God comes it will always mean both judgment and promise. God always comes to bring life and salvation, but just as clearly God comes always to expose human sin and purge everything that stands in the way of justice and freedom from oppression. Knowing this means there is always a tension present as humanity seeks hope in God's presence but knows the behaviors indulged will be judged. Ahaz has refused the seed of hope God sought to plant but years later this offer to be with us came to be fulfilled in the birth of another child, a son who would become God with us in the most amazing of ways. Isaiah tells Ahaz, that God will proceed with a sign despite his lack of trust, but the rest of the passage tells Ahaz his own plotting and refusal to trust will result in his own defeat by the time the child is two years old. Ahaz learns what his lack of trust will mean for himself and his nation. The child will grow up and God will do what God was going to do...and this news was not good news to the king. The fact that "God is with us" means we cannot forever do things our own way. We cannot expect to lay out our own plans and have them all come together in neat and tidy ways. "God with us" means that most anything could happen, and most anything will! God's offer of a promise was given to strengthen faith, the very thing we often ask for when we aren't sure we have heard God correctly—a sign, visible proof that the Lord has indeed spoken. When the writer of the

gospel of Matthew looked into the Isaiah scroll, he saw God's offer to provide a child who would become God with Us, as being fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus to live among us; to proclaim the nearness of God's reign and shine a light on how to bring in closer. Matthew actually spends very little of his thought on the actual nativity of the child who he attests as being the Immanuel sent to be God with Us. Luke's account of Jesus' nativity is given from the perspective of the mother who gave birth, Mary. Matthew instead is concerned with how this arrival fulfills the prophecies from the Jewish tradition: the lineage of David, the place of birth and God's direct involvement in the process. Our tendency is to focus on Luke's narrative. We like to think about the beauty and wonder of the birth of Jesus, but in the account before us this morning we have a description of events which make the two people central to the story not figures in a stained glass window but flesh and blood people. We need to consider the distress; the sense of betrayal, disappointments and a possible host of other emotions that Joseph would have felt upon discovering his promised wife was pregnant. And from comments present when Jesus as an adult read the Isaiah scroll in the Nazareth synagogue that morning, it is apparent that Mary's condition was still a remembered scandal. She must have been subjected to gossip and hurtful words as their relationship was being observed by neighbors. That Joseph was "a righteous man" who did not want Mary punished, but also was not prepared to honor the contract at first is stated in this passage. When Joseph has made this decision, he then has a dream visitation from an angel of the Lord which changes his mind. As these two people will enter into a relationship together that is based upon what God asks of them. It is interesting that Matthew records this momentous event with extreme brevity using only two verses: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place this way (v.18) and "he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son" (v. 25). The brevity makes a point, the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, recorded this way bears witness to an event most of the world ignored. Except it wasn't as if the world actively was ignoring anything. It was just a birth, like millions of others, unremarkable in every possible way, which is the again the point that Jesus came as one of us. Matthew paints a picture of the utter normalcy of the holy family which means he shows the complexity, the confusion, and the frailty that attended this family. There is nothing exceptional about this couple, except that God works through it to save; to draw near to us in love, grace, and salvation. Jesus was born like we are, lived as we live, loved and laughed and suffered as we do. And died as we will die. And then on the third day, God raised him from the dead, that we might no longer live in fear of death. Of course, all the events surrounding this Jesus as he walked among us proved that his was no ordinary life. He made choices and lived in obedience to a mission which serves to redeem us all. But it is essential that in all the wonder which surrounds the nativity in Luke that we remember Jesus came as a vulnerable infant into the care of marginalized peasants, dependent upon them for his survival. Matthew's inclusion of the conception as the work of creation done by the Holy Spirit establishes a firm connection between Jesus and the work of God in creation. This should prepare us to see the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' actions. It should also open our eyes to look around so we can see the work of the Holy Spirit among us...still creating a space for God's ways and reign to be among us. The Holy Spirit is manifest in Jesus' actions and his teachings. Matthew also present Joseph as one in whom the Holy Spirit works; Joseph is a righteous man but his righteousness is not confined to what is found in the Law, but is based on being open to the movement of God to do a "new thing" through him. When Joseph receives the message

from God in a dream, he doesn't debate or question; he acts directly and immediately in response to the call he is given: to act as parent to God's son. Through his example we can see the power of God to transform our decisions and our lives. He becomes a model of faithful discipleship that allows God's spirit to create newness within us. God is always at work, often in unexpected ways and frequently uses ordinary folks to accomplish his creative work...the work of transformation and redemption to make the world ready for his reign. God's promise to be with us frames this story...just as we need to allow it to frame each day of our lives so God can work within to open us to how he calls us to be and act so the reign Jesus proclaimed comes near.