



“Joy Despite Sadness”

Text: Isaiah 7:10-16

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

The First Sunday in Advent
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Personal protective equipment.

Social distancing.

Hand hygiene.

Daily infection rate.

Asymptomatic.

Immunocompromised.

Food insecurity.

Quarantine.

We have learned a whole new vocabulary over the past many months. A strange and unwelcome vocabulary that is even more jarring and irritating as we enter the season of Advent. This is not the Advent we wanted. We wanted the choir and the carols. We wanted gatherings and community. We wanted the “comfort and joy” of the Advent season and the Christmas to come.

And now, because of the unwillingness of leaders to lead and neighbors to be neighborly, we feel robbed of another holy season. Infection rates have not subsided. The death toll climbs. The wearing of masks is still understood in partisan political terms. People are growing weary of not being able to do as they please.

Easter was celebrated in isolation and it appears we will celebrate a distanced Covid Christmas. It will not be an Advent and Christmas with which we are familiar, as we continue the fight against the invisible enemy that is the Coronavirus.

The enemy in Isaiah's day was quite visible. Isaiah was a prophet to King Ahaz of Judah. To the north, King Resin of Aram/Syria/Damascus and King Pekah of Israel wanted King Ahaz of Judah to join an alliance with them against the rising superpower of the day, Assyria. Kings Resin and Pekah were willing to use any form of coercion that their disposal to pressure King Ahaz. The threat was visible - present - conspicuous - unmistakable - unbidden.

To Ahaz and his people, living fearful lives in dread and seclusion comes the Word of the Lord. God invites Ahaz to ask for a sign. A sign can be natural or supernatural, but it serves to call particular attention to what God is doing. Ahaz demures, saying that he will not ask God for a sign. Isaiah brings the word, saying, if you won't ask, God will offer you a sign all the same.

It is at this point that the text suggests that the prophet is no longer speaking only to Ahaz, but to the entire nation. The sign may have begun as something between God and Ahaz, but now the whole kingdom of Judah is called to attend to what God is saying.

"Look! the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Let's be sure we are clear: the world for *virgin* does not appear in the Hebrew text. The word used means "young woman." Patriarchal scholars and interpreters, along with the fundamentalists requirement for a virgin birth, have negatively influenced our understanding of Isaiah. The use of the word "look!" means that the woman was present and pregnant. Not some future woman with a future pregnancy. Some have even suggested the young woman was the wife of King Ahaz. Perhaps.

Dr. Patricia Tull, who graciously filled this pulpit a few weeks back, in her commentary of First Isaiah, tells us:

When this child is named by his mother...she is echoing Jerusalem's confidence, showing herself to be a daughter of Jerusalem, taking her stand in the midst of crisis, exhibiting a trust that will be confirmed by circumstances before her son reaches even a few years of age.¹

If, in fact, the young woman is the queen, the birth of this child would mean the continuation of the David's royal house. And that would mean that the kingdom would continue after the present crisis because a new ruler would soon be born.

So, the original meaning of the passage is a word of comfort and hope. In this time of crisis, God will be with the people of Judah. As words of an attack against Jerusalem arise, God will be with them in their fear and sadness. God will be with them - helping them - strengthening them - providing for them. God will be with them.

The enemy that you and I face today may be invisible, but the effects of its presence are seen everywhere we look. The coronavirus and the impact it has had on every aspect of our lives has reshaped everything we think and do. It is oppressive in its constancy.

It has caused untold hardships of every kind. Medical personnel and first responders have been - and continue to go through - more than we will ever fully know. Teachers and educators have put in tireless hours without compensation to reconfigure learning in a variety of settings, never knowing from one day to the next what kind of education they will be offering that day. Small business have been decimated and may never be able to come back. Millions have lost their jobs, their insurance, and their self-respect. Suicide rates are on the rise. Like a stone dropped into a murky pond, the ripples of the coronavirus extend outward and outward and outward and no one is immune from their influence.

And that is to say nothing of those we know and love who have contracted the virus and struggled to survive. It is to find oneself feeling helpless to offer comfort to those who have lost loved ones to the virus. It is to find ourselves wrapped in anger, frustration, resentment, and exasperation as we wait for a vaccine and a move toward more familiar patterns of living.

We are not that different from Ahaz and the people of Judah. We live in fear. We live in uncertainty. We live in precarious times. Hope is dwindling. The heaviness of worry is ever-present. Our joy is hard to find.

But the Word of the Lord comes to us as it came to the people of old. God is with us and God will be with us. In these days that were supposed to be filled with anticipation and joy, God is with us, walking through the uncertainty and sadness, the fear and the unknown. In these days that are traditionally among the happiest and merriest, *and* this year are disappointing and discouraging, God promises presence and strength.

People, look east! The time is near!

The end for personal protective equipment is in sight!

Social distancing will give way to long-awaited embraces and hugs!

Our hands will not be raw from constant washing.

Daily infection rates will no longer dominate the news.

Asymptomatic is a word we will put away.

Immunocompromised will no longer be a cause for despair.

Food insecurity will give way to plenty for all.

Quarantines will be lifted and we will be free to move beyond our homes in safety.

People, look east! The time is near!

God is with us! God is our refuge and strength! God will lift us up!

And we can claim again: that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For now and evermore. Amen.