

Sermon on 4AdventA: Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 12-23-2007 by Pastor Dave Van Kley

Immanuel

The first people I met in the first congregation I served were the Lappala's, an odd couple separated by about 25 years of age. Don, the husband, was a retired forest service employee, whose claim to fame had been participation in the wolf rehabilitation project in Minnesota and Michigan. After his first wife died, he'd "robbed the cradle" by marrying Gail: together, they'd birthed a child who was then in middle school. But the main thing I remember about the Lappala's is that they took care of Don's daughter from his first marriage, a 40 year old woman with severe disabilities. I can't recall the reason for this, only that Faye was in a wheelchair all the time, had to be fed and changed, and that she could not communicate with words. She'd look at you and emit a kind of high-pitched scream, which, as a young man, I found very scary. But the Lappala's always seemed to understand what Faye wanted.

Think of the profound sense of loss and fear Don and his first wife must have felt when they first learned of Faye's disabilities. Did they know before she was born? Had they considered an abortion? Were they tempted to put Faye in an institution, so they could live more freely?

Why would Gail even consider marrying a man like Don? She would have known that to choose him was also to choose Faye. She chose to live with a disabled woman who was not her own and care for her all her life.

I know the Lappala's would say that they made the right choices. Still, I wonder: in their place, would **I** have made the same choices?

In today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons, two young people face difficult choices—and a child is at the center of their struggle.

Isaiah tells us about young King Ahaz of Judah, caught between a political rock and a military hard place. Two of Judah's neighbors, Israel and Syria, had forged an alliance against the brutal and budding superpower, Assyria. "Either join **us**," their kings warned Ahaz, "or we'll attack **you**." Which was plenty scary to Ahaz! But he was smart enough to know that Israel, Syria, and Judah together were no match for Assyria. It would be like Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras taking on the U.S.! So Ahaz had decided to pay the King of **Assyria** for protection against his own neighbors!

When Isaiah comes along, it is to deliver a message from God: don't do it. Don't put your trust in weapons—**anybody's** weapons. Do the right thing and put your trust in **me**. I will protect you. Look, whether you want it or not, I will give you a sign: a baby will be born to a young woman who will name him **Immanuel**, which means, **God with us**. Before that kid is old enough to know right from wrong, this whole mess will go away.

We're not told just who this young woman was. We do know what Ahaz did with the information: he ignored it. He went ahead and cut a deal with the King of Assyria.

In today's gospel, Joseph faces a dilemma. Mary, the woman to whom he is engaged, is pregnant—and not by him! Today, that would be an awkward personal matter, but in Joseph's time it was a **legal** matter with frightening consequences. Not like in the early days of Israel, when Mary might have been stoned to death, but bad enough. According to the law, Joseph could clear his name by breaking the engagement in court. He could keep the dowry and send Mary back to her family—**they** would be stuck with her illegitimate child. Or, they could cast her out into the world, where prostitution or begging would be her only options.

Joseph loved Mary too much to do that. He was a **righteous** man, says the text. He wanted to do the **right** thing. Then as now, doing the right thing sometimes means not doing the **legal** thing. He decided to act **against** the law, in favor of mercy, by dismissing Mary “quietly.”

A big thing for this young man to do! But in a dream, the angel proposed a bigger and still more frightening choice. “Take Mary as your wife and raise the child as your own, for the child is from God. Name him **Jesus**: he will save the people from their sins. Remember that Old Testament story about a child named Immanuel, God with us? Well, this child will **be** Immanuel. The sign that God is with you and all people. So, Joseph, do the right thing.” When he woke up, that's exactly what he did.

Still, you wonder: what difference does it make? What difference does it make that Jesus was born, son of Mary, sheltered by Joseph? What difference does it make that God was with us in a **child**, this illegitimate, weak, and vulnerable child?

For one thing, if God was with us in this child, **all** children are in some way signs of God's gracious presence! As Christians, we cannot look at a child without remembering Immanuel, that God with us? The children in our own homes are signs of God's presence. The children in the homes of the children we raised! The young who live without sufficient parental support or basic resources. Youth threatened by violence and drugs. And yes, even children as yet unborn. What does it mean to do the right thing by them, to shelter them like Joseph?

What difference does it make that Jesus is born when we're afraid? When you're between a rock and hard place, because doing the right thing is scary? What does it mean in this world where terror threatens everyone's safety? When our leaders struggle over what to do with Iraq and Iran and Korea? When we hear of violence in shopping malls and churches? Does it make any difference to know that Christ is come and Immanuel—God is with us?

Yes! The belief that Immanuel—God is with us—casts out fear. The risen Christ

said to his disciples, “I am with you always to the close of the age—so go to every nation with God’s message.” Paul wrote to the persecuted church: “If God is with us, who can stand against us?” When you are afraid, remember: Immanuel. And do the right thing.

Brothers and sisters, the things that make me afraid are so often such **small** things. This week, for example, I was trying to write this sermon and the phone kept ringing from people who needed assistance. I confess to you that I wasn’t very understanding because I kept thinking, “I’ve got to get the sermon done.” That was my conscious thought. But if you traced that thought deep into my subconscious, you’d encounter a string of fears reaching all the way to the chambers of my heart. If I don’t get the sermon written, I won’t preach well. And if I don’t preach well, people won’t like me any more. If people don’t like me, they won’t come to worship. If they don’t come to worship, CLF will fold. If CLF folds, I’ll lose my job. See how it all comes down to **me** in the end? The original sin! And you know that subconscious, slippery, slope as well as I do.

Today we hear: Immanuel, God with us. Jesus is born. So do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to do the right thing.

I never thought about this title for God very much until I went to a church with this name: Immanuel Lutheran Church. We were in early twenties, then. God was “the man upstairs,” of whom we were quite suspicious. God was “the presence in people’s hearts” which we hadn’t really experienced. But in that place we came to know God in a different way—as Immanuel, the God who is **with** people. **Among** people. Even **in** people. God with the children brought to the baptismal font. God with the people gathered around the table for coffee. God with the preaching of the Word by a flawed human being. God with the singing of the liturgy by one whose voice was off key. God forgiving us with the gift of crusty, homemade bread and too sweet wine. Immanuel!

That’s what helped me come to believe in the One who created the heavens and the earth, the One who takes up residence in our hearts. Because of Immanuel I made the scary decision to attend seminary.

Immanuel! God is with you. Jesus is born! So do not be afraid to do the right thing. Do not be like Ahaz, but like Joseph. And the Lappala’s. Amen.