

## The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**A: Advent 4**  
**Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25**

**18 December 2022**  
**Salem, Bridgeport**

### “Ask for a Sign!”

I love these readings from Isaiah and Matthew  
and I believe that God is going to speak to us powerfully through them this morning!  
Let me just read the texts one more time to refresh your memories.

*From Isaiah 7.... “The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,  
Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.  
But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.  
Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David!  
Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?  
Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.  
Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”*

*And from Matthew 1:  
“When ...Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child...  
Joseph ...planned to dismiss her quietly. But ...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,  
‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child ... in her is from the Holy Spirit.  
She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins’.  
All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:  
‘Look, the woman ... will bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us’.”*

Our Lutheran denomination is one that often follows the Revised Common Lectionary,  
a schedule of Bible readings appointed for each Sunday over a 3-year period.  
In the original lectionary that we are currently using,  
the Old Testament reading has been selected to complement the Gospel reading.  
The good thing about that, is that it helps us see the continuity  
between what God did for Israel in Old Testament times and what God did for us in Jesus.  
The bad thing about that, is that our Old Testament readings jump all over the place  
with no historical context,  
so let me first give you the background on what is happening here in the story from Isaiah.

Youj’ll recall that at 1<sup>st</sup> there were 12 tribes of Israel, but they wanted to have a king like other nations,  
and so God eventually gave in, and gave them King Saul, King David, and then King Solomon.  
After Solomon’s death, however, dissension broke out,  
and 10 of the 12 tribes broke away to form the Northern kingdom of Israel called Ephraim.  
And the 2 tribes that remained faithful, Judah and Benjamin,  
formed the Southern kingdom of Israel which was called Judah.

And so to understand today’s reading you need to know a few things.

First, God had promised Judah that a descendent of David  
would sit on the throne of the kingdom of Judah until the Messiah came.  
God made that promise, and because God is faithful, God could be trusted to keep that promise.

Second, at the time of Isaiah, Syria had become a world power  
and was a huge threat to both the Northern and Southern kingdoms.  
The way the Northern kingdom dealt with that threat was to make an alliance with Syria  
to attack the Southern kingdom.

So now King Ahaz and Judah were facing not only Syria, but the 10 other tribes of Israel.  
They didn't have the military might to face either one of those, let alone their combined strength.  
They were looking at total annihilation. And they were filled with fear and despair.  
God had promised them that they would survive until the Messiah came,  
but everything they could see with their eyes told them that they were going to be destroyed.  
Their faith had fled.

In our gospel reading, Joseph finds himself in a parallel predicament.  
All that he had believed that God had promised to give him had in an instant been snatched from him.  
All of his dreams of a life with the woman he loved were destroyed.  
All of his hopes for happiness had been hijacked.

Our congregation finds itself in a similar situation.  
For so long we believed that God had great things in store for us.  
And then in the space of a few short years,  
we've lost most of our diversity and find ourselves in what looks like a dangerous decline.

We know what this is like on a personal basis, too.  
We want to believe that God is there, and that God will keep God's promises to us,  
but we look at the situations in our lives and it just doesn't seem possible.  
The enemy whispers words of doubt into our ears  
and it's hard to hold onto our faith and trust and hope for the future.

And yet, no matter how faithless we humans are, God remains 100% faithful.  
God is faithful because God has both the power and the love to fulfill every promise.  
And God is not only faithful, God wants us to know that he is faithful  
so that we can live, not in fear or doubt, but in faith and hope.

God didn't want King Ahaz to be filled with fear and doubt and despair.  
So God told Isaiah to go and not only take a verbal message to Ahaz,  
but to take something else with him that he had never taken before.  
God said, take your baby son, Shear-jashub, meaning "a remnant will return", with you,  
as the sign that I will keep my promise and not allow Judah to be destroyed.  
So Isaiah took the baby with him, but it was not enough of a sign for Ahaz to believe.  
Ahaz was still afraid.

So God said through Isaiah,  
"Then ask me for another sign – anything – Anything – ANYTHING! And I will give it!"  
But Ahaz says, "No, I can't ask. To ask would be to admit doubt. I can't do that."  
And God is there, "But you ARE still doubting and afraid and I don't want you to be!  
So I'm going to give you a sign anyway.  
And here it is: a young woman will have a child and will name him Emmanuel, God-with-us.  
In other words, Judah will not be totally destroyed.  
A young woman will survive and will have a child  
and she will know that she has survived because I am with her and with Judah  
and she will be so grateful that in joy she will name her son "God with us",  
because she will KNOW I have been with her."

God didn't want Joseph to be filled with fear and doubt and despair.  
And so God wants to give him a sign. He doesn't tell Joseph to ask for a sign.  
He just goes ahead and gives him one. He speaks to him in a dream, saying,

“Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife!

Remember the promise I made to Judah hundreds of years ago –  
the one to keep a descendent of David of the throne until the Messiah comes?

Well, I've kept it all these years. And I am still keeping it.

And indeed, I am about to fulfill it totally and completely  
because this child Mary is carrying IS that very Messiah.

Now let me say here – parenthetically –

that I always wondered why Mary's son was named Jesus and not Emmanuel.

But here is the thing. The name Jesus means he would save people from sin.

But what is sin? Sin is separation from God. It's disconnection from God. It's being where God is not.

And what does the name Emmanuel mean? It means being connected to God.

It means that we are no longer separate from God because God is with us.

In other words, Jesus and Emmanuel are just two ways of saying the same thing.

But back to the main point of our readings.

God made a promise to Judah and God wanted Judah to live with faith & hope in that promise.

But even though they remembered the promise, they found it hard to trust in the promise,  
given what they saw happening all around them.

So, God gave them a sign.

And when one sign wasn't enough God said, “ask for another one – ask for any sign you can think of –  
because I want to reassure you, I want to renew your hope. I want to strengthen your faith.”

And even when Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, God gives him one anyway.

God made a promise to Joseph and God wanted Joseph to live with faith and hope in that promise.

But even though Joseph remembered the promise,

he found it hard to trust in the promise, given what had just happened.

So, God gave him a sign.

God gave him a sign to reassure him, to renew his hope, to strengthen his faith.

I have always believed in my heart that God has a plan for Salem –

that the reason God allowed us to keep that \$600,000, despite yearly deficits of \$60,000+  
from the time I came to Salem until the time we sold the building,

was because God has a purpose & plan for Salem right here in Bridgeport that God has yet to fulfill.

When I was unsure about whether we should sell the building,

God gave me a vision and a message to trust in God's ability to “control the tracks”.

And later that vision and message was confirmed by an actual experience  
as I sat on a train watching someone control the tracks.

When I was unsure whether to move into an office here temporarily

or fix up the office for the long term, God gave me a sign that it was for the long-term.

There have certainly been times when I've looked around at present circumstances

and I've been filled with doubt and despair, but every time that has happened,

God has given me a sign that has renewed my faith and my hope.

And by this point God has given me so many signs that most of the time I am 100% confident  
that God is calling Salem to something totally new

that will be far beyond whatever any of us can imagine.

And if I ever start doubting, I know that I only to have to ask for a sign,  
and God will give me one to restore my faith and hope.  
That's what God did for Judah and for Joseph.  
It's what God does for us here at Salem and it's what God does for me.

And it is also what God does for you.  
God has a plan and purpose for your life.  
If you are still here, that means you have not yet fulfilled that plan and purpose –  
God still has promises to fulfill in your life, visions to manifest, dreams to bring into reality.  
It doesn't matter what situation you find yourself in,  
it doesn't matter how impossible the circumstances seem,  
it doesn't matter how impossible things feel,  
God has the power and the love to do whatever it is that will accomplish God's will in you.  
And, at those times when you are filled with doubt or fear,  
then know what God is saying to you today is "Ask for a sign."

And why does God want us to do that? Because God wants us to know that He is with us.  
Not in some theoretical way. Not in some abstract way. Not in some ephemeral way.  
But God is with us in ways that we can see and hear and touch and feel.  
God is with us in such a powerful way  
that it totally dissolves our doubt and despair, and causes our fears to flee away.  
God is with us in such a powerful way  
that it restores our faith, renews our hope, and revives our strength.  
God is with us in such a powerful way  
that we can believe that God will make a way where we see no way,  
that God will shine light into the darkness,  
that God will defeat even our most powerful enemies,  
that God will keep his promises even when it seems impossible,  
that God will bring life where we see death,

God made a promise to Judah and to Joseph. And when they doubted, God gave them signs.  
God has made promises to his Church and to Salem. God has made promises to you and to me.  
And God wants us to live in complete trust and hope that God will fulfill those promises.  
Will we have times when we doubt? times when we are afraid? times when we have lost hope?  
Of course. Even Jesus had those times.  
But God loves us so much that he wants to free us from our fears and doubts.  
And so, God gives us signs to restore our hope and faith that God is indeed with us.

In this first chapter of Matthew  
we are told that a child will be born who will be called Emmanuel, God-with-us.  
And in the last chapter of Matthew Jesus leaves us with these words:  
*Go therefore and make disciples... And remember, I am with you always...."*

That's the good news of the Gospel-that God loves us so much that God will be with us always.  
And when we forget, all we need to do is ask for a sign, and God will give it.  
God will give it because God wants us to have hope and faith  
in the God who keeps every promise, who will fulfill his plans and purpose for our lives,  
who is with us yesterday, today, and tomorrow, God-with-us, forever and always. Amen