

Fourth Sunday of Advent Dec. 18, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah 7:10-16

At the beginning of our passage, Ahaz, the Davidic king who sits on the throne of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, finds himself in an overwhelming and frightening situation. Two bordering nations, Syria and Ephraim (the Southern Kingdom of Israel) are conspiring against Ahaz to bring destruction and usurp his throne. Ahaz's fear is palpable; earlier in text we read, "When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind" (Isa. 7:2).

God sees Ahaz and attempts to soothe the fear that overwhelms. God will protect Ahaz, and his chosen nation of Israel; and to that point he offers Ahaz the opportunity to ask for a tangible sign of promise to cling to in the midst of his distress. Ahaz, however, politely declines; "I will not put the Lord to the test" (Isa. 7:12). It may seem that Ahaz is humbly declining God's offer out of reverent respect, but in fact, Ahaz has already made a deal of protection with the Assyrian king, and he would prefer not to trade tangible expressions of power for God's incorporeal promises.

When I hear Ahaz's response to Isaiah, I can't help but think, "Are you kidding me?" What an opportunity—to ask anything of the Lord! And yet, isn't Ahaz's response also mine? "No thank you, I will gather myself by my bootstraps and handle it on my own." God's power is indeed incomprehensible, and typically displayed in ways we could never envision, and if we're honest, sometimes don't really prefer. Who wants a baby when a conquering army is close at hand? Yet these humble signs are precisely the vehicles through which God can and regularly does make a way.

- In what sign would you ask for God's promise to appear?
- How can you practice patience as you wait for God's response in the midst of your fear?

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Gratitude and thanksgiving; these are the words that come to mind when we think about prayer. In our last reading in Isaiah, God was benevolent in extending a sign to Ahaz that he could lean on in troubled times. In Psalm 80 however, we hear the words of a community who is frustrated and feisty toward God. They feel abandoned, and are not shy about letting God know. Accusations abound as the Israelites charge God with purposely giving them over to harm. Perhaps even more surprising than the accusation is that the community goes on to offer God an ultimatum: "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. *Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name*" (Ps. 80:17-18, NIV, emphasis added).

The Israelite community is calling Yahweh to account. God made promises to care for God's covenant people, and they are demanding God hold fast to God's end of the deal. We can be certain that

God hears us in our suffering, but sometimes it requires the sounds of our lament to draw God's gaze. If this psalm, and the Psalms in general, can teach us anything, it is that God desires our full range of human emotion. God heard the groaning of his people in Egypt, and when speaking of the persistent widow, the Lord says, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7-8a, NIV). Our tears become a declaration of our faithfulness; a stake in the ground that says we believe that God can and will make a way to deliver us into freedom.

- If you have trouble lamenting before God, consider why that might be?
- Take a few moments to journal through a time you have felt, or observed others who felt abandoned by God. Spend a minute recognizing the emotions that stir up as you are writing. Consider ending your time by offering any of those emotions to God.

Romans 1: 1-7

My mother-in-law raised four boys, all of whom are no more than two years apart in age. When I complain to her about the antics of our youngest son, she laughs knowingly and shares how my spouse proved the most difficult of her boys. As an adult, I know him to be kind-hearted and steady, but as a boy his demeanor was mischievous and overflowing with energy. While he was still just a boy, he managed—with minimal bumps and bruising—to fall out of both a tree, and (aided by his suspenders getting caught on the door handle) a moving vehicle. Friends of his family still remark how surprising it is to learn that he, of all the Fisher boys, became a pastor.

In this seven verse introduction, Paul is setting a foundation upon which his entire lengthy letter will rest. As far as introductions go, this is pretty intense. It takes careful and thorough scrutiny before the average reader can grasp exactly what Paul is saying. As I wrestle with the foundational theological principles that Paul sets before us in this passage, I can't help but marvel, "This is the same man who was formerly persecuting Christians!" As my mother-in-law delights in the unexpected path of one of her sons, we too can be bewildered by the surprising people and means by which God calls and equips.

Paul himself certainly was. In his letter to Galatians, he admits how much he tried to destroy the early church, and yet it is precisely the circumstances of his life story that make him all the more aware of God's grace in extending mercy. In one of his more beautiful and poetic exhortations, Paul declares to the Corinthian church:

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (2 Cor. 4:7-10).

I have never known a juncture in history where "hard pressed on every side" feels more applicable, and yet the God who was victorious over death, and able to bring about a miraculous change in Paul, is surely capable of doing a new and creative thing with this weary world.

- In what surprising ways have you seen God show up in the world?
- How do you consider your own life to be "set apart for the gospel of God?" How is God using your own particular story to display His strength?

Matthew 1: 18-25

Life certainly moves in strange and surprising ways. I suspect that as Jews familiar with Torah, Mary and Joseph knew the stories of God showing up in the world in unexpected ways. What a gift we have been given as readers to have two different accounts of this surprising pronouncement: one to Mary in Luke's Gospel, and then Matthew's account to Joseph. They are strikingly different; Mary responds immediately with joy while Joseph is decidedly unsure. The tether that ties the experiences is the Angel's exhortation: "Do not be afraid!"

Let me be honest, after an initial reading, this feels like a perfunctory expectation, cruel even. How can you tell them not to fear the cataclysmic upheaval this revelation will unveil in their life? It certainly feels like there is much for them to fear, and much for us, as well. But this is the message that God has been conveying to his people from the very beginning. "Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine" (Isa. 43:1b). Our God has not left us to our own devices, but sees and knows our suffering. This is why God extends a sign to Ahaz, and responds when we lament and rage against the injustice in the world. The exhortation the angel passes along to Joseph comes not as a passive response from a God unwilling to know or understand our pain, but as an expression of solidarity from one who has entered into that fearful reality *with us*. Emmanuel. We need not fear, because we know how the story will end; resurrection and restoration is what awaits! While we anxiously ready ourselves for future glory; we cling to the promises and stories of our past that paint pictures of all that is possible and all that one day will be.

- Does the angel's exhortation, "Do not be afraid", come to you as a welcoming respite or as yet another task you must attempt to achieve? Whatever your present reality, name it before God.
- What stories from either the Old Testament or New Testament offer you the most hopeful reminders of the future glory that awaits?