

Sermon for December 24th, 2024

CHRISTMAS EVE

[Note for Deacons and Lay Leaders: I am of the opinion that worship services should not overshadow celebrations of festivities, for we worship God with enjoyment of His blessings: if people are anxious to celebrate, then over-extended liturgy can be counterintuitive to our goal. Whichever day you choose for this message and liturgy, I recommend having a *brief* full service or using the Order for Family Devotion, then and having a short period of devotion, singing, and praise on the other day.]

READINGS

Isaiah 7:10-14

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: **11** “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” **12** But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” **13** And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? **14** Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Psalms 110:1-4

The LORD says to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.”

2 The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

3 Your people will offer themselves freely
on the day of your power,
in holy garments;
from the womb of the morning,
the dew of your youth will be yours.

4 The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.”

1 John 4:7-16

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. **11** Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. **16** So we have come to know

and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. **17** By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. **20** But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” **22** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). **24** When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25** but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Our text for meditation this Christmas Eve is on our Old Testament reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Asking for a Sign

A man gets the dreaded letter from his work. “You have been let go,” it reads. Yet another round of layoffs hit the office, and this time he wasn't as lucky as before. The next week, he gets another letter. “We are sorry, but we are closed to applicants at this time.” This would be the first of several hundred letters, emails and phone calls he gets from different places he contacts for work. Eventually saddled with a gig economy job, he barely makes ends meet. This leads to his frustrations with women; when they *do* respond to his offers for dates, it always ends with a cold, unfeeling “not interested.” He isn't rich enough, he isn't handsome enough, and it doesn't look like he has a future. After a number of years, this man throws up his hands and asks God for a sign.

A woman hears it again from her live-in boyfriend. “I'm just not ready for marriage, it isn't the right time. I'm sorry.” When the positive pregnancy test comes in he leaves her, and his last words to her are “I'm just not ready to be a father yet. I'm sorry.” After a struggle to get benefits for her and her child, she finally settles down into a rhythm of life, but when the crushing weight of loneliness brings itself down on her back, she seeks a new man. Men will reject her in online dating, saying she made too many mistakes; in real life, they will reject her more gently saying “I'm not ready to be something like a stepfather. I'm sorry.” Years pass, so she throws up her hands and asks God for a sign.

In 2020 a child hears her parents argue about money for the fifth time in a week. She has no friends, not since the schools were shut down over COVID. The next thing she knows, the schools reopen but they tell her to use “social distance” and wear a mask...for two years. Her only companions are her parents – that is, until the divorce. Then she has one parent for one week at a time, and neither of them talks to her. When the country opens up, and she doesn't have to wear the mask anymore, older people make fun of her for what they call “that blank stare” on her face. It looks like she's still wearing a mask. After everything opens up again, she hopes to make some friends but nothing happens. When

she finds out that nothing changed, she will throw up her hands and ask God for a sign.

An old widower has gone to the nursing home. Then he is told he must leave. The retirement fund isn't paying his bills anymore. Hidden fees from the bank robbed him blind of the money he needed for his sunset years, and the cost of care at the nursing home has increased because of inflation. He spends a number of months in the cold, homeless and begging until his children feel bad enough to let him live with them. Two years later, as he is nearing the time for passing on, he can no longer speak. But his son and his daughter in law, who have cared for him during this time, see him raise up his hands and they wonder if he is asking God for a sign.

Why Ask for a Sign?

Why ask God for a sign? We hear all the time that Christians are supposed to be made of *sterner stuff* in our faith. There shouldn't be a need to ask for any sign from God, we should just be *sure* of things. Occasionally one of my contemporaries in the pastorate will say that it is even sinful to seek after a sign, because the Law of Moses says "you shall not put the Lord your God to the test."¹ In a certain sense, they are correct. If from a deranged or arrogant heart someone decides they are higher up than God, and can *judge* Him by whether or not He performs miracles, then yes asking for a sign *that way* is a sin. God is not some circus monkey, and He does not have to dance when we tell Him, and He owes us absolutely nothing.

But that is not what we're talking about here when it comes to the *good* sort of sign-request. Of the stories I just told, each and every one of these people was looking for something that only God can provide. Whether or not they were believers, they know that God can hear them. They don't want proof that God *exists*: they already believe He's there, otherwise they would not want a sign from Him. Nobody asks for or hopes for contact from someone who does not exist. What they all really want is something to *hold onto* during the rough years, something to reassure them that God cares about them. I'll tell you right now that from *that* sort of heart, this is a perfectly good thing to ask for. It is no sin.

The Sign Given

One caveat though, my friends. It is no sin to ask God for a sign that He still cares and loves them. It *is* a sin to reject the sign that He gives in response to that request. God always points us first to the Word, where He has already given the perfect sign. If you ask God to show you that He loves you, He will point you to a manger in Bethlehem. He will remind you that there was a virgin who gave birth to His Son there. He will show you that same blessed Child, grown up to be a man who bravely went to a Cross, and who then rose from the dead. God will promise that if you believe in that very one and *trust* Him, then you will live eternally and have His care forever.

Are you poor, despised and afflicted? God points you to the manger and tells you that the baby there was born so that you have a bright future, free from poverty, shame and pain. Are you lonely? God tells you that the infant who lays in a bed of straw has come to give you a family that will be with you forever. Are you desperate and anxious? Behold, the sleeping baby who was born to give you rest – for His yoke is easy and His burden is light.² Are you angry, are you tired of all the injustice you see around you? God points you to His Son, who established and will establish perfect justice.

Two miracles happened when the Virgin gave birth to our Lord Jesus. Yes, there is the Virgin Birth itself, which guarantees that the salvation of our souls is from no one but God. We cannot say that humanity saved itself, nor must we thank any particular race for bringing the Christ Child to bear. The Virgin Birth means that all credit goes to God. Yet more impactful is the second miracle, the

¹ Deuteronomy 6:16

² Matthew 11:28-30

Incarnation. That is, the sign that our Lord gives is God With us. That is what the very word Immanuel means. God with us, my friends. When the young man, the young woman, the poor child and the old widower all raise up their hands and ask our Lord for a sign, He replies with “Here I Am.” Our Heavenly Father sent His Divine Son to earth by way of the Holy Spirit's working through a single poor virgin girl, and from that moment on we have had a guarantee that Jesus is with us, even unto the end of the age.³ It is to this very sign that He points us, that no matter how difficult things might get, He is with us, He loves us, and He shall see us through it all until we have heard those precious words, “enter into the joy of your master.”⁴ Let us hold on to this very sign, with the peace of the Gospel upon us, for that is the very purpose of the sign He gave.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

3 Matthew 28:20

4 Matthew 25:21