

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – December 13, 2020

Hymns: A Candle is Burning (vss 1,2,3); 110 – Come, thou long-expected Jesus;
114 – Emmanuel, Emmanuel; 166 – Once in Royal David’s City

Scriptures: Isaiah 12:2-6; Zephaniah 3:14-17; Philippians 4:4-7

Sermon Title: The Truth of Christmas: God With Us

Isaiah 12:2-6

*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.*

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say on that day:

*Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.*

*Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.*

*Shout aloud and sing for joy, O Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

Zephaniah 3:14-17

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.

The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;

On that day they will say to Jerusalem,

“Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

The Lord your God is with you; he is mighty to save.

He will take great delight in you; He will quiet you with his love,

He will rejoice over you with singing.”

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I’m about to read you a story. It is a somewhat unlikely story, but as I read it, I would like you to try very hard to imagine this story actually happening. I would

like you to try very hard to listen to the words, and think about them as true; every bit as true as a report on the six o'clock news, or a late-breaking story on the National, or a headline in the Guardian – maybe even more true than that. I would like you to think about how this event impacts you, affects you, what it means to your life. Try hard, now, for a moment; and listen. As though for the first time, listen:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. Matthew 1:18-25

I want you to keep trying, for a moment. It's hard, because it so familiar, but I want you to think about this story of Joseph and Mary and the dream and the miraculous conception and the birth and the baby and the rest, I want you to think about as not just a story, but as an event. Not just something long long ago and far far away, but something that happened - in our world - that affects us very profoundly, right to this day. I'm not saying you didn't believe it before, but I'm asking you for a moment to really think about what it means to believe that this actually happened; to really think about just what this means, to our world, and to us, right here, right now. For God to be with us. For God to be here. God With Us. God Here. Now.

It isn't easy. We are used to Christmas being a box we open, a seasonal gift, a December celebration, which is packed away again in January, as we get back to the daily toil and grind. But try with me. Think hard about Christmas as not just a dream, or a wish, or a mercantile invention. Think that what the Bible says happened, happened. Think hard about God coming into our midst as one of us,

saving us, healing us, loving us, setting us free. Think hard for a moment, that it is all true, that in fact, as Paul says in his letter to the church at Philippi, “The Lord is Near.” Right here. With us. Now. In Our Midst. Literally, “At Hand.” How would that change things? How would that change us, and our world?

We have some help in thinking about this. Isaiah, Zephaniah and Paul thought hard about it. Isaiah and Zephaniah are looking forward to just such a time, imagining what the impact would be, and Paul, like us, is looking back; he’s looking at the impact it made. And astonishingly enough, in thinking about how “God In Our Midst” would change us, would change our world, they all came up with the same answers, the same Christmas list.

Isaiah - some 700 years before Joseph and Mary were on the road to Bethlehem in the ancient Nazarene version of a rusty clapped out pick-up truck with one headlight broken - Isaiah was looking forward to just such a time, and somehow saw it, and saw it all (Isaiah 12:2-6 New Living):

*See, God has come; come to save me. I will trust in him and not be afraid.
The Lord God is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.
With joy you will drink deeply from the fountain of salvation!
In that wonderful day you will sing:
Thank the Lord! Praise his name! Tell the world what he has done.
Oh, how mighty he is! Sing to the Lord, for he has done wonderful things.
Make known his praise around the world.
Let all the people of Jerusalem shout his praise with joy!
For great is the Holy One of Israel **who lives among you.***

God has come. God lives among us. God with us - Emmanuel. The Lord is near. In the same way the person sitting in the pew beside you, behind you, in front of you is near, so near is the Lord. And so, says Isaiah, there will be salvation, trust, courage, strength, and song. Songs of peace, of joy, of thanksgiving. If this happens (says Isaiah) – when this happens – if God truly would come to be with us – this is how it would be. This is what would change. Our story would change from one of death to one of salvation, from one of suspicion to trust, from endless anxiety to freedom from fear, from weakness to strength, from weeping to song. This is what would change, when God comes. When God is with us. When God is near.

Zephaniah - like Isaiah, some 700 years before Mary moaned on a haybale while Joseph gave the stable a quick mucking out before they got down to the

business of childbirth - Zephaniah was looking forward to just such a time, and somehow saw it, and saw it all:

Sing, O Daughter of Zion (he writes); shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:14-17 NIV)

The LORD is with you. And so, says Zephaniah, there will be singing, gladness, rejoicing, forgiveness, peace, courage, salvation, and, in the heartbreaking beauty of Zephaniah's song, "*The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save; never again will you fear any harm. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*" Like Mary calming the cries of the Infant with her lullabies and smiles, like Joseph holding the fragile Baby in his strong and callused hands, so God will comfort us; "*He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*" Songs of peace, of joy, of thanksgiving. If this happens – when this happens – if God truly would come to be with us – this is how it would be, says Zephaniah. This is what would change.

The Apostle Paul - some few years after he had given up making a living hunting the followers of the Baby grown to a Man, the Man who would be killed and then live again, the Man whose life would give life even to those whom Paul made sure were dead and gone - the Apostle Paul, to whom the Risen Lord had appeared, knocking him off his horse and into the arms of God - this same Paul was looking back to just such a time, and somehow, despite being struck blind and seeing for the first time all over again, Paul looks back, Paul looks around, Paul looks forward, all the way to you and me, and sees it all:

*Rejoice in the Lord always (he writes); again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord **is** near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, **will** guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7 NRSV)*

The Lord is near, he writes. The Lord is near, and so there is rejoicing, and gentleness, and freedom from anxiety; the Lord is near, and so there is prayer, and thanksgiving, and peace. In our hearts and minds, there is peace. Because, as Paul saw, the Lord is near. The Lord is here. This has happened – God truly has come to be with us – this is how it is now. This is what has changed.

Just suppose they're right. Just suppose that Christmas is not just a dream, or a wish, or an invention. Just suppose that what the Bible says happened, happened. Just suppose that God has come into our midst as one of us, saving us, healing us, loving us, setting us free. Just suppose, for a moment, it is all true, that in fact, as Paul says, "The Lord is near." Right here. With us. Now. How would that change things? How would that change us, and our world? How would that change you?

Salvation, trust, freedom from fear. Strength, peace, joy, thanksgiving. Gladness, rejoicing, forgiveness, an inexplicable inner calm. If Christmas is true, if God really is with us, isn't that what all of us want more than anything else? Isn't that what all of us need more than anything else? Aren't these the gifts to which we hope we will awaken on Christmas morning?

We rub the sleep from our eyes, we make our way to the living room, we reach into our stockings all hung by the chimney with care, and we pull out a box, a small box, a box carefully wrapped in gold paper, a box with the words written upon it in a hand old and new; "The Lord is near." And we open the box, carefully, wonderingly, anticipation welling within us. We open the box, we lift the lid, we peer inside, and inside is...

Well, inside that box is that which was laying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes; inside that box is peace, and joy, and strength, and comfort. Inside that box is hope, is forgiveness, is salvation, is the answer to our fears, is the stilling of our anxious heart. Inside that box is the gift of God, and it is for you, and it is for me. For the Lord is near. The Lord is near.

That is why we sing at Christmas. Pandemic or no pandemic, protocols or no protocols, together or alone, that is why we sing at Christmas, songs of peace, of joy, of thanksgiving. It is because Christmas does change everything. It is because "The Lord is Near," changes everything.

The Lord is near. This day, and all days, the Lord is near. Think hard about this. Think about what Christmas really means. It is the Truth of Christmas. To you. To our world. Think hard. And sing. Thanks be to God. Amen.