

Fourth Sunday in Advent, Dec 18

The fourth Sunday of Advent cannot really wait for the Christmas festival, the light is bright, the four candles are lit, and we can start to see what the Lord has in mind for us. Today we hear of angels visiting Joseph, of a virgin who conceives and bears a son for the salvation of people.

Yet this day is not without its darkness as well. The Savior is not coming for a visit, as though he is some relative who lives in another state but will return their home after the holidays. Jesus' visitation is not a social call. He is a Savior who rescues us from a real problem and logic suggests the bigger the savior, the bigger the problem he has come to address. This is none other than the Son of God who shows up on the scene, the problem is a problem of cosmic proportions, it is sin itself.

Ahaz will face the terror of an enemy encamped upon his gates. Joseph will face the horrible, gut-wrenching pain of betrayal. The Savior has good news for both of them, and they both involve a young woman who is pregnant and the child that she bears. Both will be called to believe that the birth of this child affects them. Paul also calls our attention to the effect of this miraculous birth has upon us. He speaks of an obedience of faith. We too are called today to believe and act accordingly. To live in the promises of God is not as easy as it sounds. A serious Advent challenge is issued to ourselves and to our parishioners today. Christ has come into the world. He has saved the world. The Child of Mary, the Son of God, this Jesus of Nazareth, born in a stable has redeemed the world. How shall we live in that truth? How shall we see this world differently, how shall we act differently, how shall we think differently about it all? How will that reality in which we live shape the lives which we live? To live conformed to this world is a crisis of faith.

Joseph would welcome a child into his life, a child whose presence at least initially caused him great pain as he believed his betrothed had been unfaithful. Ahaz will be called to trust God in the face of great peril. Paul will call us all to an obedience which flows from this faith.

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Quickly lifted from us... The prayer seems to have forgotten the patience to which James urged us last week. Advent focuses our attention on our need, and as the season draws to a close, we are reminded that sometimes we feel that the need is acute, the rescue must come speedily.

SIN (original sin) = brokenness. This is not really a moral category but a description of the human condition after the fall. Yes we commit sins, but that is because we are broken. Take a look at Augustana II or Formula of Concord I for more on this.

Out of SIN come many nasty things, including the nasty things I do, but also the nasty things I suffer. I get sick because my body is broken. My house might be destroyed by a flood, tornado,

hurricane, earthquake, etc., because the world is broken. Ultimately this brokenness will result in my death.

Even our conception of sin is corrupted by SIN. Remember a couple of weeks ago when Isaiah envisioned a world in which the wolf and the lamb lay down together? God is planning on fixing problems I did not even know were problems!

The preacher must ask himself what are the sins that weigh us down from which a mighty and speedy rescue is required. Her is a list we generated in past discussions. Can you add to it?

- 1. Hurting relationships, the closer the relationship, the greater the weight.*
- 2. Chronic illness – especially painful or difficult illnesses that never leave us. Getting old really is hard.*
- 3. Unconfessed sin – guilt that is unresolved is a great weight on many of us.*
- 4. Defeatism – our church is dying, too small, not growing, etc.*
- 5. We often suffer from an unrealistic expectation that life should be like the movies or television shows. We are disappointed when it is not that way, and we are unwilling to do the hard work to make life better.*
- 6. Habitual sin/addiction. Am I actually in control of my life, my thoughts, my desires, or my deeds? Probably not.*

Remembering the Biblical definition of Sin, this can be pretty interesting. The Bible, of course, would define sin as anything that is not the way that God made it to be. Cancer is a sin in that definition, so is an earthquake or a war or fire in my dining room. You get the idea. The stuff that kills, destroys, hurts, maims, and makes life miserable fits inside the biblical definition of Sin. This has real implications for the confession of sins, doesn't it? Have you ever come to the Sunday morning services so worried about a bank overdraft, or a medical test, or surgery, or something else that you really could not think of anything naughty to confess? Did you feel guilty about that? (Then you know you are a true Lutheran, if you feel guilt about not feeling guilty.) My guess is that your parishioners have sometimes felt that the moral failings they believe they are supposed to confess are the least of their problems. I would furthermore guess they also wish God would come and help them with some of these real problems. If we have not proclaimed the Jesus who died for the whole of sin and the sin of the whole world we have only preached an incomplete Gospel.

There are really two aspects to the help which Jesus brings. Does Jesus lift the burden from us or does he strengthen our backs right now that we may persevere? We wait for the day that he will lift every burden, dry every tear, etc., but right now there is also a back strengthening that happens in this. There are real consequences to our sins which often dog our lives. The knowledge of Christ and His work strengthens us now to stand stronger this day.

The rite of confession is perhaps more broadly needed. We tend to think it only applies to the moral failing, but isn't a rite of forgiveness really an expression of hope and confidence that Jesus has born the sin, the ugliness of this life so that I will not need to bear this always.

The relative problem presented by the naughty things we do would make an excellent point of debate. Perhaps we will have to do that sometimes. After all, the biggest problem I may have may well be the fact that I have not done what God has said to do. Yet, I cannot but think we might do better by our own people by saying that the biggest problems we have are the very things that God calls "sins." This way when we say that Jesus died for the sins of the world, we might just include the overdrafts, the tests, the surgery, the painful backs and knees, the failing marriage, the broken heart, the whole gamut of stuff that afflicts us, some of which is not related to naughtiness or niceness, but to the broken human condition. He died for all of it, for all of us. His blood atones for the sins of the whole world. He promises to dry every tear.

Of course this has an interesting preaching connection for the person who is coming to Christmas in our culture. The children's song suggests that Santa rewards and punishes for naughty and nice – but the One we expect is far more global and comprehensive in his work. What is more, he comes to bring salvation, rescue from all sin, death, and affliction of the Devil, to His faithful people.

So what is weighing us down that cannot wait for that rescue? What brokenness of heart, what fear, what hurt, do we bring to God this day that only his love can heal? What ogre looms over us that we need the strength of God to intervene on our behalf, driving this wretched reality away?

As preachers, this has to start with us, doesn't it? In addition to all the burdens of our own humanity, are we exhausted by the burdens of a congregation which seem just too large for us to bear? Have I tried to do Jesus' job? And our people, what weighs them down? Are they burdened by the economy? Is it their families? Is it their health? Is it death itself who has ripped a loved one from their lives? Does unresolved or unforgiven conflict make going to Church or seeing someone in the grocery a painful experience? Do you find yourself loitering the dairy section until you notice someone heading out the door? Are the doors of your church locked up because you fear a vandal, a thief, or just someone who would harm what is precious to you? Are we afraid to let Jesus out of the manger and into our own lives because the world will laugh or scorn us? Does fear dictate our behavior and thus weigh us down, distorting our lives, turning us inward like some widow with a bent back? Have we created a fence between Church and home? Some have effectively compartmentalized their lives so much that they have a religious hour on Sunday, but Jesus has not actually died for Monday morning as much as Sunday morning. This is simply not true. Jesus has offered his forgiveness, love, help, and strength for the challenges we face every day. Jesus wants to present every day in our life, because he wants to bless every day of our lives. Jesus not the guy who lives in the building, but who inhabits our very bodies (Eph 2:19ff.) and would go with us out these doors and into our homes and workplaces.

Jesus is very holistic this way. He belongs to the whole person – he works in the whole person, emotional, intellectual, financial, spiritual, and all facets of my being.

Isaiah 7:10-17 a little context is provided

In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. ² When the house of David was told, “Syria is in league with Ephraim,” the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

³ And the LORD said to Isaiah, “Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field. ⁴ And say to him, ‘Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. ⁵ Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, ⁶ “Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,” ⁷ thus says the Lord GOD:

“‘It shall not stand,

and it shall not come to pass.

⁸ For the head of Syria is Damascus,

and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

And within sixty-five years

Ephraim will be shattered from being a people.

⁹ And the head of Ephraim is Samaria,

and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.

If you are not firm in faith,

you will not be firm at all.’”

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. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. ¹⁷ The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

¹⁸ In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. ¹⁹ And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thornbushes, and on all the pastures.

In the past we have talked at this point about proleptic interpretation of prophecy. Proleptic refers to the 'now-not yet' nature of the Christian experience. Christ has forgiven us fully, we are wholly the children of God in Baptism, but yet we wait to see it, sin still bedevils us. The virgin has born her child, we can say "Immanuel" and yet we groan under sins heavy load. Proleptic prophecy would suggest that there is more than one young woman who bears a child in this prophecy. There was a young woman to whom Isaiah pointed but of course there was another young woman who lived centuries later, named Mary. We spoke of how at the time of Isaiah there was a fulfillment of this prophecy, but Jesus was a "fuller-fulfillment" of the prophecy, and the last day, will see the "fullest-fulfillment" of the prophecy.

I should also tell you that this is not without some controversy in the LCMS. Certain literalists balk at this idea and think that it lets all sorts of bad things into the interpretive mix. I for one am not that uncomfortable with it. Interpretation is just messy and attempts to sanitize it with rules just don't work that well. The Holy Spirit of God and the community of faith in which He continues to blow have to be the guarantee of hermeneutics. Not set of principles can ever really do that.

In terms of preaching this week, the preacher will want to take the time to read carefully the first part of the chapter if you have not done this in a while. Immediately after his call vision in chapter 6, Isaiah is sent out to King Ahaz whom Isaiah finds inspecting the walls. The king is new to the job; in fact he is only 21 years old. Can you imagine entrusting your country's defense to a 21 year old King in a time of war? The kingdom was being threatened by an alliance of Israel to the north and Syria to the northeast. They were planning to rebel against the growing power of Assyria before Assyria's grip grew too strong. Their position was good, but their problem was that Judah lay behind them. Judah was not a large country, but it was ostensibly in the same economic/political empire which was led by Assyria. If Israel and Syria rebelled, Judah would be obliged to attack them from the rear. Two front wars are very difficult to fight. They wanted Judah to join the rebellion, but, advised by Isaiah, Judah did not join. So Israel and Syria intended to capture Jerusalem, install a new king of their own choosing on David's throne, and begin their rebellion.

Judah was always weaker than Israel, and with Syrian forces, they could not hope to withstand an assault by any reasonable estimation. Isaiah says that their hearts all shook like leaves in the forest. But God had other words. Isaiah met the king as he inspected the defenses and in the course of telling him to buck up and take heart, he apparently pointed to a young woman and said that she would conceive and bear a son. By the time the boy could tell his right hand from his left, he would be eating curds and honey. The enemies which surrounded the city on that day would be gone, there would be plenty of milk to make curds and one could go outside the city and find the bee hives to get the honey. In other words, there would be peace.

Of course, this whole thing has also caused a bit of consternation in the minds of some people. Verse 14 is one of the "proof texts" of the virgin birth of Jesus. The understanding of the text I have suggested above is rejected by some who insist that Isaiah was talking about Mary, and

only about Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus. There is a problem with this interpretation and it has nothing to do with suggesting that Isaiah could not have made such a prophecy. The problem is that this would have been precious little comfort to Ahaz and the people of his day. How good is the news that 750 years from now a child will be born? Confessionally speaking this is atrocious – it completely removes Isaiah from the pastoral context in which he is located.

Young king Ahaz is a distinct improvement over the evils of his predecessor, Uzziah. But he is not up to David's standards. Ahaz will not trust Isaiah's prophecy, but he will send money to the Assyrians, funding an army to come out and attack the Israelite and Syrian armies, drawing them off of Jerusalem and to their destruction. In the resulting turmoil, the northern kingdom will be utterly destroyed and its people scattered into an exile which did not really end. Only the southern tribe, and of that only the citizens of Jerusalem, were able to maintain cohesion during the exile. The prophecy came true, but Isaiah was not happy that Ahaz took matters into his own hands. Was the plight of the Israelites somehow tied into the faithless behavior of this young king?

It would seem that the threat which loomed and the fear with Ahaz felt could be read in parallel with things today. How are we tempted to solve our own problems instead of letting God do that? When is it appropriate to solve our own problems? Are we to be utterly passive in all this? When do we act? Does not Jesus say to care for the poor? Are we to wait until Jesus shows up to start paying attention to some of his priorities? Yet, when do we say it is a time for faithful waiting and prayer, and when it is a time to do something? How does one guide one's people?

Bonaventura, the great medieval Franciscan Scholastic and Monastic is said to have quipped: "Work like it all depends on you, believe like it all depends on God."

So what is the preachable in all this? Where is the sermon for our folks? They are not really interested in the finer points of hermeneutics and how we understand Isaiah's prophecy. One way to run with this is to say that God is unfolding his salvation plan centuries prior to the birth of Jesus. The Assyrians, their successors the Babylonians, and their successors the Persians will be intimately tied up with the story of God's people. One of the young men the Babylonians haul off is Daniel, the prototypical wise man. The wise men who come to worship Jesus in Matthew 2 are really the successors of Daniel! How did they know? They probably were reading the very texts which Daniel and the rest of the exiles had brought with them and imbedded in the Mesopotamian culture.

Another important message: Ahaz was called to faith. He would go on to try his own solution and that would cause much misery. But even though Ahaz was a bit of a loser as a king, God still invited him to faith, sent him prophets, and urged him to faith. What is more, even Ahaz's foolish attempt to solve the problem himself did not thwart God's larger plans. Our faithlessness is met by God's continuing faithfulness!

The preacher might also speak a message of hope. The plight of the citizens of Jerusalem was not a matter of indifference to God. He cared about them. He cared about that young woman whom

Isaiah used as an illustration. He knew the name of her child, he had seen the day when he would eat curds and honey. Our problems often seem like they are beneath God's notice, but he sees us all, he loves us all, he cares what happens to the least of his children. Indeed, no sparrow falls to the ground but God knows it.

Psalm 24

The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,

² for he has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.

⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle!

⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory! Selah

Of course vs 7 forms the opening lines of a great Advent hymn you might want to sing today and point out the psalm connection. Notice too, however, the first verses which assert the truth which undergirds Isaiah's prophecy and our faith. It all belongs to God. So what are you worried about?

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

⁷ To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is, I believe, one of the most important passages in the NT. For me, the real clincher is verse 5, in which Paul describes his ministry. He has received a gift (grace) from God to be an apostle who calls gentiles to the obedience of faith.

But what is the obedience of faith? If you have not done so, consider Luther's comments in the one year series appointed to this day. He is not talking about Romans 1, but he could be for all that he says about Philipians 4.

I find it easiest to start thinking of this in terms of what it is not.

- 1. It is not the obedience that comes from fear. That is the obedience which I only obey as long as the threat hangs over me. This is the State Trooper sitting by the road, I am a law abiding driver until I get over the hill and then the accelerator hits the floor.*
- 2. This is not the obedience that comes from reward. This obedience is simply the other side of fear, they are two sides of the same coin. I do not love what it do, I love the reward and the service becomes simply a means to an end. I will show up on time for a job I don't really like because my employer writes a check at the end of the pay period. This is not the obedience of faith.*
- 3. Obedience from faith is not the obedience that comes from respect; although, this is a good obedience. This is the athlete who respects his coach and works hard, perhaps amazingly hard for the approval of that coach. This is a good thing, but it is not the thing that Paul preaches. It is closer than fear/reward, but it is not quite it.*
- 4. This is not even the obedience that comes from love. This too is a good thing. The parent who rises from her bed at 3 in the morning to care for the tyrannical infant whose needs will not wait is obedient to that little tyrant, but it is love that brings her into out of her bed and into that nursery. This is a very good thing, but it is not the entirety of what Paul speaks.*
- 5. The obedience of faith is not a sense of duty or integrity which prompts us. Sometimes we obey just because it is the right thing to do. This is another good sort of obedience, to be praised and encouraged. This is the sort of obedience which we often encourage in a police officer or soldier. But internal motivation and just being plain good is not the*

reason we do the things we do out of faith. Paul does not call forth an obedience which serves the law as though the law itself were the end of all good. It is a good obedience, worthy and praiseworthy, but our obedience flows out of something even greater.

Paul calls his hearers, and us today, to an obedience which comes from faith, the relationship with God in which we are saved from our great need by His gracious act of Jesus on the cross. This is the love of God shown to us, not my love for God in action, but God's love for me, received via faith, in action. Our Confessions speak of this as a passive and active righteousness and insist that we keep this straight. This is the obedience to which Paul calls us. This obedience is empowered by God and I believe lies behind so much good in the world, good done by little people who don't seem capable of it. They do the most amazing things for which there is no explanation. I am thinking of the woman in my parish who taught Sunday School for 69 years or the guy who is down there every week feeding folks at the homeless shelter or the kid who amazes you by being a decent human being in a terrible situation.

The preacher will need to keep straight what he means by faith here. Our culture has a strong urge to turn faith into a work, the virtue which we bring to God and which God rewards with heaven. This is just another form of works righteousness. If I would assert that my faith makes me more loveable or less problematic for God, then I have missed it entirely.

As we have said elsewhere and need to keep in mind, English has a vocabulary deficit when it comes to faith. We have the noun but not the verbal form. To believe is propositional. I can believe that what you say is true, but that might make no difference to me. Greek has a verbal form of faith, "to faith." "To faith" in something is much stronger than the English use of "to believe." When Paul speaks of an obedience which comes from faith he does not mean an obedience which flows out of simply assenting to the reality of God or a set of things which God has done like creation, incarnation, etc. To faith in God means he carries my life in his hands, cares for me, loves me, and without him I am totally lost. This is not something I do as much as something I am. To faith in God is, for me, best understood like a little child in his or her father's arms. That child does not make some mental decision to trust her father; she does not elect to be his daughter nor does her trust and dependence on her father make her his daughter. She trusts because this is her father and when he picks her up and carries her around the room, she is completely safe and at home. The obedience to which Paul called the Gentiles, including us, is this sort of obedience. It is flows out of this reality which describes God and me.

"To the unbeliever there is no explanation, to the believer it needs no explanation," Mother Theresa explaining how she can minister to the poor.

Other interesting note, verses 2-3 look like the fragment of a song. Larry Hurtado, whose book "Lord Jesus Christ" I highly recommend, says this is an important fragment of what the early church believed about Jesus. These words are unique in the letters of Paul, he says this nowhere else. Hurtado suggests that he is quoting something which was familiar and widely believed in the early Christian community. They were apparently singing Christological songs in those early

churches. Especially when you remember the other early songs we think we have are Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20

Notice also the role the resurrection plays in this. This is the demonstration of his son-ship. Remember this is Paul whose life was completely transformed by meeting this resurrected Christ on a road to Damascus.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

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.

Potent Gospel texts are always paired with potent OT and Epistle texts. Have you noticed that? We have a pair of strong readings leading us into this, and this is no exception. This is the sedes, the seat, of the doctrine of the virgin birth and certainly also one of the significant passages of the incarnation. It is the truth of this passage which Paul believes, the faith from which Paul’s obedience flows.

Marriage in the ancient world was very different from our own experience of it today, which is largely a contract freely entered into by consenting adults. In the ancient world it was expected that a young woman who began menstruating would soon be married, an arrangement which was made by her parents with a young man whom they approved of and who was able to support her. We think that meant most girls married by about the age of 15-16.

Men on the other hand, had a different expectation laid upon them. They were expected to have established themselves in a career or occupation, set up a home, and accumulated the means to support a bride and a family. It was not unusual for men to be 25-30 years old before they

married. This resulted in a serious age gap between men and women, and which also accounts for the frequent reference to widows in NT and contemporary literature.

Joseph, having entered into an arrangement with Mary's parents to marry their daughter, has a number of options open to him upon the discovery of Mary's pregnancy. He could publicly renounce her which probably would have resulted in her being shunned by the little community of Nazareth, dooming her to single parenthood and disgrace and dooming her child to being without a real name. We don't know much about Nazareth itself but, depending upon the fervor of the community, she also could have even been stoned to death. For a man whose feelings undoubtedly were hurt, this had to have been an option.

He could have claimed that the child was his own. Everyone would have told him he should have waited and given him a nudge and wink. But that does not seem to be a possibility for Joseph. The truth matters to him.

He could have divorced her quietly, not making an issue of the pregnancy. This would have allowed Mary to remain in her parents home, have the child, and then marry the man who had impregnated her. If Joseph loved her, this would have been a heartbreaking choice to make but also the most loving thing to do for Mary. The fact of her pregnancy would have meant she must have feelings for someone else. Joseph's heartache would most likely have been that she loved or cared for someone else and did not want to marry him.

His fourth option would be to admit that the child was not his, but to marry her anyway and raise the child as his own. This would have taken the greatest act of charity on his part, but it ultimately is the course which he adopts. The difference is that he legally adopts the child. This was important for people in Matthew's day because Jesus' legal standing was apparently being called into question. As a bastard child, he would not have had standing within the community, at least among the legalistically minded Jewish element. Matthew is probably including this story to equip his first century readers to answer the charge that Jesus was illegitimate. Once Joseph takes him into his own home, any charge of illegitimacy can now be prosecuted as a slander or defamation of character, the sort of language the legalistically minded Jewish element understood very well.

But of course, Matthew is also guided by the Spirit of God as he writes this. There is much more here than just the refutation of a first century charge of illegitimacy leveled against Jesus. This is an incredibly important text for understanding who Jesus is. Luther said that Joseph's and Mary's faith is probably the greatest miracle of Christmas. He ranked it above the virgin birth and the incarnation itself.

Do we see the faith of our own parishioners, even if they are few and sometimes weak in that faith, do we see that faith as a miracle of God? I would sometimes tell my people after the absolution that I had seen a miracle. Here was a guy who said that their sins were forgiven and they believed it! A miracle! It is really a dramatic thing if you think about it for a moment.

Jesus is born of a virgin. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Joseph to have heard that in a dream? I can only imagine that his response would have been, “yeah, right!” with a good shot of sarcasm mixed in. (The only instance in any language I aware of in which a double positive makes for a negative!)

What is the good news for our people that we still believe in a virgin birth? Why does this still merit a line in the creed? I think we ought to articulate that for a few minutes on Tuesday, it would be a good idea. The virgin birth says some very important things about Jesus, but most of all it simply roots this whole event in faith. If one cannot accept this, how can one really confess the incarnation or the resurrection?

The other piece in here that is worth mentioning is the name of Jesus. It means “He saves” or “Yahweh Saves.” There is a whole sermon in that, the sort of faith builder that leads to the marvelous obedience to which Paul calls us.

What is the Gospel which we need when we confess that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary”? Does the confession of Mary’s virginity at the birth of Jesus really have something to do with the divinity of Christ, the incarnational truth? When we confess the virginity of Mary we are really saying that Jesus is the Son of God – God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God! Of course, the miracle involved in a virgin birth precludes Joseph’s paternity. If Mary had not been a virgin, then one would have never known who was the father of this child, but the virginity of Mary establishes the miraculous nature of Jesus’ birth.

This is all true, but I am not sure it is really very preachable. It seems to me that the faith of Joseph is really the story here. Even Mary’s trusting assent to the angel, while parallel to this, is different. She knows that she is a virgin, she knows that she has not slept with a man. Joseph really has to believe this.

Law

1. God makes some really wild promises that the world says are impossible. It is easy to look around us and agree. Will the lion really eat straw like an ox? Will the dead live? Will the enemy who is ready to devour me really be overcome?
2. That double-mindedness really saps the energy and strength out of us. Our service becomes empty, a hollow going through the motions. An obedience of a completely other sort than God intends for us.
3. This last can really show in our Christmas celebration. The Grinch might not have to steal our Christmas if it really is all about toys and stuff. Without Christ at the center of this time of year, without believing that that babe in the manger is ever so much more than another child born in poor circumstance, this all can get empty very quickly. It can turn into the competition about who has the most lights or the nicest

home. (I actually like the remake of the “Grinch” with Jim Carey from a few years ago for this. Of course, I also just like Jim Carey’s portrayal of the Grinch. Elf also does a good job of portraying the emptiness of Christmas. Unfortunately both of them don’t fill it with anything more than the saccharine sweetness of sentimentality and an act of the will when it comes to celebrating Christmas differently.)

4. Our faithlessness also can lead to some really poor decisions in life. Ahaz calls in the Assyrians, Joseph could have abandoned Mary and this child, and what easy road beckons us? Shall we buy our family’s affection? Shall we see the monster at the gate and run? Shall we try to kill it ourselves? Will I invest more of my life into a fitness regime than I do in service to my fellow man because I fear my own death more than I love them?
5. Sometimes things look really bleak. When one’s betrothed is cheating on you, when an enemy has surrounded your city, when the test comes back positive or when the call comes in the middle of the night with terrible news, the whole world can look very dark.

Gospel

1. God is really good at keeping promises. The birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of hundreds of OT promises, from Isaiah 7:14, to Genesis 3 when he promises Adam and Eve that one of their descendants will crush Satan’s head. We can count on the promises of God, he delivers.
2. The faith which trusts in Jesus taps into an amazing power source. We do not believe in God to manipulate that power, but we who believe are surely plugged into it. The amazing acts of kindness, love, and sacrifice we see people do are not of themselves, but they are of God, the same God who dwells in all of us through the Spirit and the indwelling Christ through that same Spirit.
3. This empowers a real celebration of Christ-mas. The gifts we give are shadows, reflections of that gift of himself. The lights we put on our tree and our home are reminders that he is the light of the world. The greenery in the depth of winter reminds us of the life that he brings to the coldness of death, the ornaments we hang on our tree are but foretastes of the treasures that are ours in Christ. The beauty of our homes and the songs we sing are hints of heavenly glory and angelic singing that we shall partake of in His kingdom.
4. This faith also empowers us to order our lives. It is not about things, so give as we are given to give, not more than that. We don’t have to overspend to show our love. We are able to face the fiercest foe with the confidence that the victory is already ours in Christ. We can laugh at death, we can scorn the afflictions of the body and the bank book. The looming recession which many worry about is nothing more than an

occasion for our great God to act in many people's lives, including my own. Perhaps through my own life he will work a miracle in a time of economic upheaval.

5. The relationship established by Christ in the waters of our baptism, strengthened in the sacrament of the altar, renewed in the hearing of the Word, that relationship cannot be broken by the world. Christ has given it, and he promises never to take it away. There are some things this nasty old world cannot change, his love for his fallen creation is one of them.

Sermon Themes:

1. The greatest miracle of all – Joseph's faith and yours! (That the hearer would confess that God has worked a great deed in us, uniting us with Christians of every time and place in one holy catholic, apostolic, Christian faith.)

This sermon will need to speak of faith very differently than our current culture sees it. Our current culture perceives of faith as a virtue, a good thing we do, usually Christians see it in a sort of semi-pelagian sense, as if God is rewarding faith when he saves us. This of course bears wicked fruit in the lives of people as they begin to wonder if they have faith.

I am not suggesting that you think this way, but please keep the poor guy sitting in the pew in mind when you talk about this. Even the proposed title above can sound like bitter law to him. If faith is a miracle and I don't think I have any, how am I supposed to pull off a miracle.

The good news for this guy and for us all is that faith is a miracle, one which God continues to work in us. Faith is a relationship in which God wraps his arms around us despite our sins and loves us. That reality emboldens and empowers us to be different sorts of people. That is what Paul is talking about in the "obedience of faith." (see sermon #3)

We are not here to question whether we have faith, but to marvel that God has worked it. We talk about faith as a reality which God has established, created by his Holy Spirit. As soon as you ask people to look inside themselves to determine if they have faith, you have just taken this sermon to a different place and you do not want to go there. Faith is the new reality that God has created in the work of Son and Spirit. It is not our intellectual assent to the reality of God or even our trust in God. That assent and trust are the product of faith, not the faith itself. Faith, the relationship, does trust, it does know God, it does things, but those things are not the faith.

Joseph could surely not have come to believe this dreamy angel who said that his bride was pregnant with God's child. Imagine telling your extended family that the girl you were bringing home was pregnant, but you had heard in a dream from an angel that this

was God's child. My guess is they would be calling mental health services as soon as you turned your back. They would be hiding all the sharp knives in the house. But Joseph believes it, he changes his course of action because he "faiths" this angels words. (Remember Greek has a verbal form of the word "faith" which English really doesn't have.)

As we anticipate the feast of Christmas this week, we notice that churches will be full, the world seems to stop and take a breather of sorts, throws a party, and gives a gift or two. Yes, some of this is simply materialism, but the materialism we loathe is only able to manifest because at the root of this day, at the heart of this season, lots and lots and lots of folks, including us, believe that baby in a manger was something truly remarkable: He is God. (NB: the tense of the verb!)

This is nothing less than a sign of the work of God. Luther counted the faith of Mary and Joseph as the greatest miracle of Christmas, greater even than the virgin birth and incarnation itself. We share that same faith, the relationship which God has established in us. We too often sell this miracle short, imagining that folks come to church because we entertain them with good music or entice them with fellowship. I am all for good music and fellowship, but those things are best and most attractive when they flow out of faith, not as the manipulation of people into our doors. We are not praising God with an eye to see who is watching, we are simply praising God. Likewise, programs and all that we do, is rendered to God in loving and trusting response to his great deed done in Christ. This is a day for the preacher to lay claim to everything we do as an act of faith, or if it is not, then why do it?

2. The Virgin will Conceive and Bear a Child (That the hearer trust God to solve his/her every problem, great and small, and to believe that the solution which God has provided has everything to do with the child whom Mary laid in that manger so long ago, who suffered, died, rose again, and who comes again in glory.)

This sermon will remember the prophecy of Isaiah to Ahaz and the promise given to Joseph. For both of these men, it seemed so unlikely! After all, Ahaz' little country was surrounded by larger and greater armies. Joseph's heart was broken. How do you fix that?

Isaiah proclaimed to Ahaz that the enemies he faced would soon be undone and a child soon born would know the taste of curds and honey, the sorts of foods that come only in times of plenty and freedom. Yet, Isaiah also spoke of another woman who would have another child, born humbly, yet whose birth would herald another sort of plenty, and a freedom for which the whole world hungers. It was that birth which brought restoration to Joseph's broken heart.

We also come to Christmas time this year amid the darkness of December and Sin's cruel grasp. Thousands are wondering if unemployment benefits will run out this week or will be a few months from now. Many thousands have an empty seat at their family table this

holiday season as a loved one serves in a distant land, fighting a strange and terrible war. All the while we still pray for the cancer victims, the aged, the poor, the suffering, and the grieving.

To us as well God says that a virgin conceives and bears a Son. Wrapped up in that birth, in some way which is often hard to see, are the plenty and the joy, the feasting and the freedom we crave.

Ahaz would believe that God helped those who helped themselves. He did not trust that God would work this deed. He summoned the forces of Assyria and destroyed his cousins to the North who were threatening him that day. Joseph on the other hand, took the child into his home. He gave him a legal status and standing in that community. It was an act born of faith, a trust in God's ability to do what he promised.

3. The Obedience of Faith! (That the hearer courageously embrace the life to which God calls him/her)

This sermon asks us to look at a couple of characters from the Bible. The struggle with this is that we can start to do hero worship. That is a problem. But to cut them down to our level isn't really the right reaction. The better goal of the sermon is to bring the hearer up to the level of the people in the text. Joseph's faith is a miracle. Yes, he was a man like any of us, not a heroic man. But God gave him faith, the same faith that brings us to church today. There is only one faith, one saving relationship with God. God gave that gift to Joseph, he gives the same gift to us.

This week we have once more had a young man walk into a school with a gun and start shooting. A year ago it was Newtown, CT. This year it is Colorado. Does the obedience of faith have something to say here? It could. Faith calls for a different sort of motive, a motive which will see our fellow human being differently (check out II Corinthians 5.) The culture in which our children are being raised is fundamentally toxic to the whole idea of a healthy life. Life in the postmillennial age has no intrinsic meaning. We have to create that ourselves. The young man who walks into a school with a gun is creating a sort of meaning for his life. It is negative, evil, and violent, but he has a narrative. The young person who volunteers 20 or more hours a week is also creating a meaning narrative for his or her life. It is healthier and better, but both of those young people are driven by a world view which assumes that life is intrinsically meaningless. (It appears this last young man was doing well until his debate coach booted him from the team – which forced him to create a new meaning for his life.)

This sermon is really based on a comparison between Joseph and Ahaz but a comparison which finds articulation in Paul's opening words to the letter to the Romans. Young king Ahaz (only 21 years old!), confronted by the fearsome spectacle of two kings who were attacking him hears a word of promise from God. God tells him that he will take care of this, but Ahaz will not trust this. He strips the temple bare of its treasure and buys off the

Assyrians. The results are apocalyptic of sorts. The northern ten tribes of Israel are destroyed. Within a few years Sennacherib will also surround the city of Jerusalem and only be kept outside by God's angel of death striking down hundreds of thousands of them.

Joseph on the other hand is confronted with another sort of terror. His heart is broken, his fiancé has told him that she is pregnant and he knows that he is not the father. He will step aside for her, let the "other man" marry his Mary, and in the little village of Nazareth he will probably watch them happily living for many years while he wonders what could have been. But then God comes to him in a dream, an angel speaks, the child is from God, this is a holy thing. I probably would have awoken from that dream and foresworn all late night snacking. But Joseph believes. He trusts. He takes Mary into his home, he gives the child legal status and commits himself to providing for the child by naming that baby; he called him Jesus.

Like Ahaz, Joseph has heard the same words of Isaiah, a virgin will conceive, but Joseph has believed.

Luther said that the greatest miracle of Christmas was the faith of Mary and Joseph.

God is working that same faith in us.

Paul's letter begins with this interesting personal job description. He has been given a gift (grace) from God, and an apostleship, an authority from God himself, to bring about the "obedience of faith" in all nations. That includes us, and we as preachers are standing up here preaching today because we are obedient, and we too are calling for that same obedience. An obedience that flows not out of some attempt to manipulate God into letting us into heaven, not some obedience because we are afraid of hell, nor an obedience which is born simply of duty or self-imposed expectation, but born of faith. We trust God, we love him, He is our Savior, our rescuer, so our lives, our words and our deeds, our jobs and families and the whole of us is somehow brought to him, a thank offering of sorts (Rom 12).

Joseph brought Jesus home when he woke up from that dream. Literally, he brought the child into his home. We dare not leave this child born in Bethlehem's manger in this place. He gladly receives our sins here, but he comes to bless our whole life. He comes to render every day a holy day in him. He comes to render every act an act of obedience to him.

It looks ridiculous and impossible for the folks who are outside of this faith. Joseph looks like a fool and Ahaz looks like he is politically savvy. But the Bible records a very different story for us. Joseph gets a bazillion plastic statues made of him to put up in front of churches in nativity scenes. Have you ever seen one of Ahaz? We also have many things which weigh us down, like Ahaz's fear, like Joseph's heart ache. They would conform us, bend us over and inward and downward. God calls us to stand upright in

him. Jesus is the same rescuer who would have helped Ahaz, the same child who was not the heartache of Joseph. We are given to look up to a cross where this Babe of Bethlehem died, it straightens us up as He lifts those burdens and bears them there.