

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 18, 2022



ASK FOR A SIGN

St. John United Church of Christ

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Rev. Rosemary Captain

Organist – Sharon Banjavcic

Liturgy – Rev. Mia M. McClain

LITANY OF THE ADVENT CANDLE:

One: We have come in out of the cold to be warmed by the Spirit.

ALL: We have come in to dream God's dream.

One: We have come to listen for God's call.

ALL: We have come to be overwhelmed with love.

This morning we light four candles; the candles of hope, peace, joy and today's candle of love. This candle reminds us that God loved the world so much that God sent the Christ child, so that we might be overwhelmed by nothing but the gifts of God. Today we celebrate God's gift of love, and we commit to sharing that love with the world.

***CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: We come seeking a sign from You, the One who sits upon the throne.

All: Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

One: We come seeking to worship You, the One who dwells with us always.

All: Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

One: We come seeking to witness your might, a child to be born in a coming night.

All: Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. (Inspired by Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19)

***INVOCATION:**

God of love – Ferocious love, fierce love, unending love, everlasting love – We gather in place with gratitude for the ways your love has called us out of bleakest and into your marvelous. We know of your renown, and we stand in awe of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known. Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel.

Stir up your might in this place. Give us life, and we will call

on your name as we worship you in spirit and in truth.
Amen. (Inspired by Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19)

***PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

One: It is so tempting to go with the easy way, the world's way, the fearful way. Many before us have been challenged by that temptation. They too were strained and exhausted. They too were hurt and hopeless. They are part of our story, we can learn from them.

ALL: Holy God, we confess that sometimes we isolate ourselves from your story and your people. We are overwhelmed by the needs all around us. We are tempted to give up in love. Forgive us, renew us, and set a vision like a star in front of us. Amen.

***WORDS OF ASSURANCE:**

One: An angel spoke out to Joseph, do not be afraid! We need not fear the limits that others place on love. God's love casts out our fears, forgives our failings, renews our strengths, and inspires our dreams. Be assured in God's love for you. Amen.

***GLORIA :**

**Glory to the Creator,
and the Christ and the Spirit so near.
As it was from the start so it shall be forever,
One God always here. (repeat two more times.)
(end) One God always here. One God always here.**

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 7:10-16

The sign of Immanuel

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: ¹¹ "Ask a sign from the LORD your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I won't ask; I won't test the LORD." ¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? ¹⁴ Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. ¹⁶ Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.

EPISTLE READING: Romans 1:1-7

Greeting

1 From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God's good news. ²⁻³ God promised this good news about his Son ahead of time through his prophets in the holy scriptures. His Son was descended from David. ⁴ He was publicly identified as God's Son with power through his resurrection from the dead, which was based on the Spirit of holiness. This Son is Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵ Through him we have received God's grace and our appointment to be apostles. This was to bring all Gentiles to faithful obedience for his name's sake. ⁶ You who are called by Jesus Christ are also included among these Gentiles. ⁷ To

those in Rome who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 1:18-25**

Birth of Jesus

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. ²⁰ As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

²³ *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.")* ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵ But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

This are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: "What part did the Holy Spirit play in our Christmas Story"

I confess that I don't talk about the Holy Spirit very often. When I was a kid, I heard the pastor talk about the Holy Ghost, needless to say, I was confused. Is that ghost like Casper the Friendly Ghost. It has taken me many years to become semi-comfortable with the subject.

When I was in seminary we had students from 11 different denominations which made for great conversations. Some of these students were very familiar with the Holy Spirit. They were very comfortable having the Holy Spirit by their side all the time and proclaiming it to everyone. I envied them. By the way, there was no class on Pneumatology in my seminary. That's a fancy name for the study of the Holy Spirit.

As I studied today's scripture passage, I found that many times we put our focus on the wrong things. For example; the virgin birth is a point of controversy among some people. However, if we come to this passage with fresh eyes, and read it as if we were reading it for the first time, we will find that what it stresses is not so much that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin, but rather we should notice that the birth of Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit. Scripture says so. Mary "was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" and "the child conceives in her is from the Holy Spirit."

It is as if these sentences were underlined and printed large. That is the point that Matthew wishes to say to us in

this passage. What then does it mean to say that in the birth of Jesus the Holy Spirit of God was specially working? It means we should set aside all the doubtful and debatable things, and concentrate on that great truth, as Matthew would wish us to do.

In Jewish thought, the Holy Spirit had certain very definite functions. We can't bring this passage the *Christian* idea of Holy Spirit in all its fullness, because Joseph would know nothing about that. We must interpret it in the light of the *Jewish* idea of the Holy Spirit, for it is that idea that Joseph would inevitably bring to the message, for all he knew. It would be as if we asked Joseph, "What will you say when you get to the maternity hospital about the father of Mary's child?" Or "do you think you have enough "Huggies" for a week.?" Do you see the disconnect?

According to the Jewish idea, (and remember, these folks are first century Jewish) the Holy Spirit was the person who brought God's truth to men and women. It was the Holy Spirit who taught the prophets what to say; it was the Holy Spirit who taught people of God what to do; it was the Holy Spirit who, throughout the ages and the generations, brought God's truth to men and women. So, Jesus is the one person who brings God's truth to them.

Put another way, Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is like and what God wants us to be. In him alone, we see what God is and what we ought to be. Before Jesus came, people had only vague and shadowy, and often quite wrong, ideas about God. (*Can you imagine a life without*

Jesus? If we think our pews are empty now, there wouldn't even be a building here and I'd be out of a job.)

But Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9.) In Jesus we see the love, the compassion, the mercy, the seeking heart and the purity of God as nowhere else in all the world. With the coming of Jesus, the time of guessing is gone, and the time of certainty has come. Before Jesus came, people did not really know what goodness was. In Jesus alone, we see true humanity, true goodness, and true obedience to the will of God. Jesus came to tell us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves.

ALL OF THIS, BECAUSE THE HOLY SPIRIT ENTERED THE WOMB OF MARY AND MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO SEE AND KNOW A WHOLE DIFFERENT WORLD.

Just put on your Holy Spirit glasses and you will see it, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with a time for silent personal prayer
King of Glory, Prince of Peace, glorious and peaceful Spirit, we rejoice with the wise and with seekers in every nation who have sought your face and found you near. We thank you for the true promise of the prophets, for the faithful naming of Jesus of David's line, Emmanuel, Divine Savior, Son of David, Son of God, Son of Mary. We praise you and are grateful for your presence in our lives.

Today we pray for all who work for us and with us, for those who have no employment, and for those who are

retired from lifelong labor. Give us good cheer in our vocations and avocations, our volunteering and community projects.

We pray for those who work in hazardous jobs, mariners and fisherfolk, miners and tree harvesters, space explorers and deep-sea divers, scientist handling dangerous chemicals and virulent viruses; grant them safety as they serve us and the whole world.

Sovereign God, you rule over all those who govern us. Bless our national and local leaders and their families. Give wisdom to those who make and administer our laws, that injustice may be corrected and our whole citizenry be led to mutual service for the common good.

God of peace, who declared peace on earth and goodwill to all humanity, and embodied that friendliness in the incarnation of the eternal Son.

We pray for all the people on our prayer list, may they know you are always near comforting them as they heal. We pray for all those who are ill, weak, lonely, discouraged, and in desperation. May they achieve wholeness soon. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

PRAYER RESPONSE: Third verse of "Away in a Manger"
**Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay
close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care.
And fit us for heaven, to live with you there.**

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

We believe in the God of justice and righteousness, and God believes in us to carry forth the mission of loving and caring for community. Let us now share our gifts and resources so that we may continue to walk humbly with God and with neighbors.

***DOXOLOGY:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise Holy Spirit Comforter;
One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen.**

***PRAYER OF DEDICATION:**

We dedicate these gifts that have been shared for the fortification of the beloved community. Let these gifts do justice in the world so that all may know they are loved by God. Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

Go forth knowing that you are loved by God
Go forth leading a life that is a sign of God's grace.
Go forth with anticipation for the restoration that is to come. And in that going, may God bless and keep you

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you, and give you peace. Amen.

PRAYER LIST: Urban Baum, David Seneczyn, Cheri Schutzenhofer, Becky Ballard, Rosemary Williams, Larry Wagner, Melvin Wagner, Floyd Lorenz, Alister and Garrett Pickens.

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW

We've heard this story many, many times. I don't know about you, but I still have several questions. Many times the problem is that we don't understand the many different cultures and customs that are unfamiliar to us who live in 2022. After all, Joseph is betrothed to Mary; then he is said to be planning quietly to divorce her; and then she is called his wife. So, what is that about? My research shows that these relationships actually represent normal Jewish marriage procedure, in which there were three steps.

- 1.) There was the *engagement* which was often made when the couple were only children. It was usually made through the parents or a professional matchmaker without the couple ever meeting each other. Marriage was held to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart.
- 2.) There was the *betrothal*, which we might call the ratification of the engagement. The betrothal could be broken only if the girl refuses to go on with it. But once the

betrothal was entered into, it was absolutely binding. It lasted a year and during that time the couple was considered husband and wife. It could not be terminated in any other way than by divorce. (In the Jewish law, we frequently find what is to us a curious phrase. A girl whose fiance had died during this year of betrothal is called "a virgin who is a widow.") Joseph and Mary were at this stage of betrothal.

- 3.) Lastly there was the third stage called *the marriage proper*, which took place at the end of the year of betrothal. It was at this stage it was told to Joseph and Mary were to be parents. That child was begotten by the Holy Spirit, and that he must be called Jesus. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Jewish name *Joshua* which means *Yahweh is salvation*. Joseph was told that the child to be born would grow into the Savior who would save God's people from their sins. Jesus was not so much the Man born to be King, but rather the Man born to be Savior. He came to this world, not for his own sake, but for us and for our salvation.