

Emmanuel: Hope for Troubled Times
Isaiah 7:10-17
First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007

Back on Monday, I decided that I wanted to start this sermon with a song that captured the mood of the Advent season. Don't worry; I'm not going to sing. I did want to find some lyrics, however, that expressed a particular emotion. So I began to search my memory banks. Early in the process I decided not to limit my search to "traditional" music. Well, to make a long story short, I'd like to share what I found. If you wish, you can join me.

War, huh, yeah
What is it good for
Absolutely nothing
Uh-huh
I said war, huh,
Good God, y'all
What is it good for
Absolutely nothing
Say it again

Now before you tune me out, let me explain. Edwin Starr, the man who penned those words, recorded that song for Motown back in 1970. As you might imagine with a song with that name and recorded at that time, it was an anti-Vietnam rant. In the midst of that terrible conflict which so divided our nation, "War" rose to the number one hit on the charts, fortunately replacing some namby-pamby ballad by Bread. Its words seemed to ring so true back then. It seems to me that those same words seem to ring so true right now as well. As a matter of fact, I believe that the words and feelings in that song are perfect for this first Sunday of Advent. If you don't believe it, then just go back and ask King Ahaz.

Only 20 years old at the time, the king of the tiny nation of Judah was just like most people and hated war. There was one big difference, however. If he didn't do something soon, he and his people would soon be engulfed in it. Assyria, the world's rising superpower back in the 8th century B.C. was beginning to flex its expansionist

muscles. Israel and Syria, Judah's tiny northern neighbors, had united in a rather foolish alliance to try and stop what was proving to be the most efficient fighting force in the world. And now they were demanding that Ahaz and his army unite with them against Assyria or they would attack Jerusalem themselves. The fear of the king and his people, as you might imagine, was palpable. It is said that their hearts "shook like the trees of the forest that shake before the wind." What would he do? What should he do? How should he save his country? Ahaz, the ruler of the nation of Judah, weighed his options and decided that his best bet was to enter into a pact with the mighty Tiglath-pileser III, the ruthless emperor of the Assyrians, the head of a very evil empire.

Now before we get to the rest of the story, let me take a moment and remind you that today is the first Sunday of Advent. Over the next few weeks, as we prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ child, I want to spend some time looking at the different names we find sprinkled throughout Matthew and Luke's presentation of that first Christmas. Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna, and the name we will look at today, Emmanuel. It is important that we know those names. It is also important that we know the setting in which those names occurred. The promise of Christmas didn't appear on a blank stage, you see. One of the fundamental mistakes that so many of us seem to make at this time of year is to think that Christmas has to come to a perfect world. You know what I mean. We all want a "White Christmas," a "Holly, Jolly Christmas," or a "Rockin' Round the Christmas Tree-Silver Bells-Santa's on His Way-Ho-Ho-Ho" type of Christmas. If that doesn't happen, if somehow we don't have what we believe to be that perfect world in which our Christmas can occur, then something must be wrong. Right? But how often do we forget that a perfect world was not the kind of world into which Christmas first came? It was far from the case. That first Christmas came to a world awash in problems. It came to a world steeped in war, heartbreak, fear, and pain. And that is especially true when we start talking about the Old Testament roots of Christmas. Unless we know them, unless we are familiar with their history, we cannot possibly know the power that this most important holiday has for us today. So let's get back to the story.

The year was 734 B.C. The kingdom of Judah sat alone, as I mentioned, being threatened on all sides by war. Ahaz, for better or for worse the one who was in charge, had to make a decision. What would he do? After weighing all the options, he decided to enter into an alliance with Assyria to fend off the immediate threat of Israel and Syria. Now on a strictly practical basis, that was probably not a bad thing to do. Politically and militarily speaking, it is really the only option that made sense. But according to the way this story has come down to us, this was not a political or a military dilemma. It was a theological dilemma. Remember, Ahaz was the king of Judah, the leader of God's chosen people. He had been given the task of setting an example and guiding the people in their faith. But as the book of II Kings tells us, "Ahaz did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." He did not always put God first in what he did. And because he did not, that put him straight in the path of the prophet named Isaiah.

We don't know a lot about Isaiah. We know that the word of God first came to the son of Amoz in 742 B.C., the same year that Ahaz' grandfather, the good King Uzziah died. We also know that Isaiah was married and had two sons, one whose name was Shearjashub. And we know that on that day in 734, when war seemed immanent, God told Isaiah to take Shearjashub and go and confront Ahaz. Since Isaiah didn't mess around when God told him to do something that was exactly what he did. Meeting Ahaz on the highway to the Fuller's field, he reminded the king that the solution to the problem before him would not be found in political or military maneuvering. Rather it would be found in theological living. It would be in trusting in God, not making deals with the devil, a.k.a. Tiglath-pileser III, that true peace could only be found. Isaiah promised that if Ahaz stood firm in the faith, this present situation "would not stand." But if Ahaz chose to go another way, that foolish way, then things would end up completely different. Isaiah said, "*If you do not stand firm in the faith, you shall not stand at all.*" He also said something like, "God wants to help you. If you don't believe it, then ask for a sign and you'll have all the proof you need!"

Well, Ahaz listened to Isaiah and then quickly dismissed him—although he did so with all the piety he could muster. He said, "Oh no, I could never put the Lord to the

test.” That’s biblical, you know. Deuteronomy 6:16—“Do not put the Lord to the test.” It sounds real good, doesn’t it? But remember, Ahaz was not the most religious guy on the block. He did not always put God first. The king simply used the scripture here to camouflage his own faithlessness and fear, you see. People still do that, don’t they? But Isaiah wasn’t fooled. He would have none of it. He wasn’t about to let that 20-year-old little twerp of a king dismiss either him or God so quickly. So he cut loose. He let him have it! Listen to how the translation known as The Message renders these words from the prophet Isaiah:

Listen to this, government of David! It’s bad enough that you make people tired with your pious, timid hypocrisies, but now you’re making God tired. So the Master is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She’ll bear a son and name him Immanuel. By the time the child is twelve years old, able to make moral decisions, the threat of war will be over...those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture.

Now I hope that you noticed that in the midst of Isaiah’s many words there was a name: “*Emmanuel*.” It’s so important, especially during this season of Advent, for us to focus on that name. It is so easy to miss. That’s due to the fact that rather than placing our focus on that name, most of us hold big debates on that one line which precedes it: “*A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant.*” Now that is an interesting line, and we could spend a lot of time on it today, trying to decipher just what it is all about. But if we did, we would miss the point of Isaiah’s entire message. Whatever that line may or may not mean, it pales in comparison to that one, most important word it lead us to—the name the child that is to be born will be called: “*Emmanuel*.” When Matthew incorporated Isaiah’s words into his telling of the Christmas story, he gave us the definition of that name: “*God with us.*” Emmanuel means “God is with us.” While the gospel of John didn’t use that name, it had the same idea in mind when it said: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” The name “Emmanuel” tells us that the God who created heaven and earth, the God who formed the people Israel and gave them laws to live by, the God who gave David victory over Goliath and saved Daniel from the lion’s den, has

come to be with us and for us. The name “Emmanuel” reminds us that God is not somewhere “up there.” God is “right here.” And for Ahaz and for us, that is all we really need to know.

I wonder if there is anyone here this morning that needs to hear that? I wonder if there is anyone in this room who needs to be reminded that, in the midst of this very difficult world, God is with us? After all, our world is not that much different from the world of Ahaz and Isaiah. 2,741 years later, war still abounds. Fear still abides. Grief, pain, uncertainty, and death still surround us on every side. The question before us today is no different than the question that was before the people back then: In whom or in what are you going to place your hope? In the military? In politicians? In alliances with this or that of this world? Or will you look elsewhere? Will you take another avenue? Will you place your hope, your trust, and your very lives in the one whose name is a reminder of our only true source of hope?

For people my age, 1968 was a fairly important year. I was only 14 years old at the time and just beginning to be aware of the world and my place in it. The year started innocently enough. I was trying to make the 9th grade wrestling team and watching The Monkees on TV. But on January 31 the words “Tet Offensive” began to be a part of our national vocabulary. A “credibility gap” began to develop between the government’s assessment and the public’s perception of the war in Vietnam. By March, things had gotten so bad that President Johnson chose not to run for the nomination of his party or to serve if he was elected. The country was in turmoil. On the night of April 4, I was sitting in the music room at Nathan Hale Junior High, getting ready to go out and do the “Mexican Shuffle” in the annual school play, when the teacher came in and told us that Dr. Martin Luther King had just been assassinated in Memphis. Sitting in the seat next to me was one of my classmates, a black girl named Carolyn. I remember looking at her when I heard the news and seeing tears begin to well up in her eyes. Later that night I heard reports of riots that were taking place throughout our country and wondered if one would occur in Omaha. Then on June 6th, just as summer vacation was getting started, Bobby Kennedy was shot and killed after winning the California primary. Even though I

couldn't vote, he was my candidate. Several days later, the hope he seemed to bring was buried next to his brother in Arlington National Cemetery. The nation grieved, and then split wide open. Everything seemed to be spinning out of control. On August 26, more riots erupted at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The whole world was watching as war broke out in our streets. As we sat in the den and watched the reports, I remember my dad shaking his head and asking, "What is wrong with this country?" Then on October 16th, down in Mexico City, just after they had finished 1st and 3rd in the Olympic 100 meter dash, John Carlos and Tommie Smith stood on the awards platform and raised their gloved fists as the National Anthem was played. More turmoil. More riots. More hatred. The Beatles were playing "Helter Skelter" and I was scared. Fear and uncertainty gripped our country. It was 1968 and I had no idea what was going to happen next.

Then on Christmas day, my family had gathered at Grandma's house, just as they always had. Like always we opened presents, ate plum pudding with little candles on the top, and tried not to be too dysfunctional during our time together. At some point during the day, someone turned on the TV. Apollo 8 was circling the moon and there was going to be a live broadcast. Everyone wanted to watch history take place. What happened next surprised everyone. As the camera focused on the surface of the moon, the voice of William Anders began reading, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Everyone in Grandma's living room became quiet as the three astronauts took turns reading the creation story from the book of Genesis. I was only 14 years old at the time, but I remember that day as if it was yesterday. It might have been the most important day of my life. For that is when I knew that as bad as 1968 had been, it would not have the last word. God was with us. Although there was turmoil all about, although it seemed as if nothing may ever again be the same, although nothing was even close to being resolved in our country or in our world, I remembered that the child's name was "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." And for me, it made the difference.

Who has the last word in your world? As you prepare yourself for the one who is coming, how do you find your way through the many wars that rage all around? Have

you forgotten that the first Christmas did not come to a perfect world? Have you forgotten that this Christmas can come to your imperfect world? *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’”* And because God is with us, we can make it.