

## God with Us

### *A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church*

Faye Burdick, Elder

December 23, 2007 – Fourth Sunday in Advent

**Scripture Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;  
Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25**

Well here it is...Dec. 23...most of us have either readied ourselves for Christmas or prioritized what we can and can not do... pruning those plans that in our idea of a “perfect world” would be just the right touch to this season of Joy, hope, justice and love

I think I was looking forward to preparing a sermon for today because it offered an opportunity to focus on something other than...well the things I’ve been focusing on... a myriad of worries and fears. So I eagerly read the lectionary readings. There was the Isaiah Scripture about Ahaz, Isaiah and God. I love that period of Hebrew “give and take”...mostly ‘take’ by the Assyrians. The Psalter was a prayer of deliverance from national enemies (that gave me a pause). Then Paul’s epistle to the followers in Rome: Paul’s a servant, apostle, and set apart to spread the good news...got it! Then came the Gospel Scripture...ugh...Joseph and the angel...verses often referred to as The Second Annunciation. You know it: all that stuff about Joseph and Mary fixing to get married, the First annunciation the angel tells Mary that she’s going to have a baby, that’s when Joseph decided he’d best ditch the marriage plans. But then an angel appears to Joseph and says that he should go ahead with the marriage plan (on paper not in bedroom) because Mary’s child is of the Holy Spirit.

Lordy me! What would I glean from this piece of Scripture to share with you? Many times doing a workshop or teaching a class on the life of Jesus, someone asks...”How could Mary be pregnant?” or “If you don’t believe in the Virgin birth, can you still be a Christian?” Or, and this is a beauty: “We do a neat thing with our children in S.S. ...we give them a prize if they can memorize the genealogy of Jesus from David to Joseph!” It’s times like that: I coo “What an interesting thought!” instead of screaming...YOU ARE MISSING THE POINT HERE! Once when Carl Ward and I use to teach together in public school, I had just given what I thought to be a stimulating intro to a creative writing project. I had used all the five senses and even clued them in on trying not to find a word that rhymes with “orange”. When I finished my “Ready, Set, Go” intro, I acknowledged the waving hand of one young student who inquired “Should we use pen or pencil”. Carl praised me for my superb control as I refrained from screaming: YOU’RE MISSING THE POINT!

But what is the point of this reading from Matthew...other than the author’s attempts to show the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the house of David...and the obedience of Mary’s partner Joseph...and the naming of the child. What is the point for us, this 23<sup>rd</sup> of Dec. 2007? SQB and the worship and liturgical arts committees had long

## God with Us

ago established that this fourth and final Sunday of the journey of Advent was to be the incarnation of the word “love”.

And so: I began to prepare: I prayed and read the Scriptures and commentaries over and over. Then I played a game of spider solitaire. I went to my commentaries. I played a game of spider solitaire. I looked up some words in my Hebrew and Greek dictionaries. I played a game of spider solitaire. I read some cutesy on-line tales regarding the Scripture. Then I played two games of spider solitaire! What was the point that God was calling me to lift up?

That evening husband Frank asked how the sermon was going. I moaned how I wished the Gospel reading was something other than the verses regarding Joseph. Frank just sparkled and said “well, I like that Scripture. Poor Joseph...he’s the forgotten man in this whole Jesus story...can you imagine how full of fear he was?”

Well there it was! Out of the mouth of Frank...the point that I surely can lift up to you from this story...it’s the first instruction out of the angel’s mouth...”don’t be afraid”. We know that fear can be a consuming, paralyzing, disabling thing. It can gnaw at our very being; filling every part of your physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritually existence.

Of course, this partner of Mary was afraid. Regardless of what you believe as to how the pregnancy occurred, it wasn’t the societal norm prior to marriage. But something within Joseph told him to acknowledge and listen to his dream...it wasn’t just an ordinary notion. How scary is that! How does Joseph save face in Nazareth, his business, his family, her family? Fear must have been laying a hold of Joseph. Yet Joseph felt God, through his dream, was telling him to not be afraid. Joseph was displacing the icy fear with facts and a plan. She’s pregnant, she’s going to have a son, God and the Spirit is with her, the child, and you, Joseph: marry her, name the child Jesus, it’s fulfilling God’s plan.

Some of us know Libby dog Hailey-Ingmire. Sometimes Libby dog turns away and leaves a room walking slowly with her tail and head hanging down, eyes lowered. We call it her “All is lost” look. That’s kind of how fear is: you feel that ‘all is lost’...I think that’s how Joseph felt. But he listened as something called: Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.

As many of you know, Frank and my younger son Kirk was diagnosed with a stage-four cancer the first week of November. It was numbing news that each hour grew worse as tests revealed the extent of the disease. We drove in near silence to Savannah. Each of us was afraid to put words to our fears. Fear for our son, fear for his wife, fear that the words expressing our fears would only increase our partner’s fear. Fear of outliving our son. Living between a motel and a hospital, the fear began to stymie our ability to read, carry on meaningful conversation, and to remember things.

## God with Us

So having just described our November and now December, I think I know why Frank resonated with Joseph's fear. I know what the point of this scripture is for us in this place at this time. For we live in such a time of real, imagined, and manufactured fear: terrorists, foreclosures, cutbacks, rumors of awesome and secret weapons, political campaigns fueled by fear, part of our economy employed because of fear, many people holding high office because they have exploited our country's fear and most tragic: our children's fear of not being "good enough".

So what do we do with fear? Maybe we need to first acknowledge it (give it a name), secondly: lift it up (share it with the Spirit of God and God's spirit in others), and then begin overcoming and living with it through facts, hope, and love.

Ahaz, like Joseph, was caught in a fearful situation. Assyria wanted to expand westward. The kings of Israel and Syria had formed a coalition to resist Assyria. They wanted Ahaz, king of Judah to join them...like a puppet king. Ahaz said "no". God, through Isaiah, tells Ahaz to not be afraid of these two kings...put trust in God not the kings. God has the last word and gives Ahaz a sign by promising the birth of a child..a child of the house of David who will be Immanuel meaning "God with Us".

What are the signs that are given to us that help us to acknowledge our fear, lift it up, and begin replacing it? Joseph had an angel. Ahaz had a promise from God as spoken through Isaiah.

Hanging on our Christmas tree is a new ornament. It's a worn yellow bookmark with an angel on it. It has many stickpin holes in it indicating that it has been fastened to many bulletin boards or walls. Words beneath the angel are these: "To find hope and comfort, you need not look far. The Lord sends His angels wherever you are".

This bookmark means much to us. The first day that Frank and I arrived in Savannah we went with our daughter-in-law to a locally-owned small restaurant. It was a late lunch and the server and food were friendly. The three of us knew Kirk was very sick but it was not until the next day that the tests told us of the real devastation of the disease. The next day just Frank and I went to the restaurant. Upon entering while Frank parked the car, the server said to me "Good to see you again, table for three?" I explained that there was only two...and then just poured out the story of our son. As Frank and I were seated a woman came from the kitchen area. It seems that the kind server had shared our story. This woman named Shelia turned out to be the owner who had gone through some very fearful times, including loosing the business she now owned owing to the dishonesty and betrayal of her partner, raising the children by herself, and the death of her best friend...her Mother. She cried, we cried, she patted us; we hugged her and then talked about hope. Shelia became the angel bringing the sign...the first sign of how to cope with our fears. She retrieved from her office the bookmark that now hangs on our tree. It had been her Mother's, and Shelia had kept it with her on the wall wherever she worked (sometimes two jobs). I don't remember anything about what we ate that day but we had been fed.

## God with Us

Since that time I have found that other feelings have eased my fears: the feeling of thanksgiving of being a parent, having a partner, receiving the care and comfort of friends and the support of our community of faith. I give thanks for the opportunity to focus on a season of a journey in life that is filled with joy, hope, peace, justice, love and the awareness that God is with us...through those people who share God's good news. The signs are present as we wait with hope, whether in a hospital room in Savannah or a pediatric ICU in Galveston.

Frank was right...yes, remember this date ...you heard me say: Frank was right and I was wrong. People do seem to forget about Joseph. In fact years ago in another church when we found that the youth that was to play Joseph in the Christmas pageant had strep throat, Joseph was just written out of the script. But Joseph must have been a good person who through opening himself to God's vision eased his fears and raised the child with care and love.

On Dec. 2, first Sunday of Advent, Susan led us in entering a journey: a journey that would call us to open ourselves to contemplate God's visions of Hope, Peace, Justice and Love. Joseph opened himself to God's vision of love incarnate in the birth of Jesus, overcoming Fear of loss, rejection and what would occur against the assumptions of the norms of the day. Hope, Peace, Justice and Love eases, massages, and conquers fear. Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid...God is with you. The sign was given to Ahaz, it was given to Joseph, and it is given to us through the birth of Jesus. Do not be afraid...God is with you.

(post script: Kirk Burdick, age 40, died on Epiphany, January 6, 2008)

Faye Burdick  
Elder, Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church  
December 23, 2007

Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church  
103 William Howard Taft Road  
Cincinnati, OH 45219  
(513) 281-5945  
<http://www.mtauburnpresby.org>