

2019 12 22 – Immanu-EL

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

This week, in our Advent study group, we read a story that used the term “shiver.” So we got talking about the things that make us shiver. I’m going to invite you to think of times in your life when you have shivered or trembled.

What has made you shake involuntarily? (*wait for answers: cold, draught, fear, awe. excitement*)

Well in today’s story, from the book of Isaiah, King Ahaz was doing more than just shivering. King Ahaz was literally “shaking in his boots.” Ahaz was the king of Judah and a descendant of its greatest monarch, King David. And he had recently learned that two neighbouring kingdoms were about to mount an attack against him and his people. In verse 2, just before today’s passage, we read, “When word came to the House of David that Syria had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the people shook, as the trees of the forest shake in the wind.” That’s a mighty shiver.

All of us know what fear feels like. Fear comes in many different forms and for many different reasons. Fear can be sharp and instantaneous, or it can be dull and chronic. It can lead us to take action or it can paralyze us. It can be caused by something real or it can be the result of our imagination. Most of all, we fear what we do not know or understand.

But, in this particular case, Ahaz had reason to fear. So YHWH, God of the Israelites, sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz not to worry because the impending invasion would not be successful. YHWH's exact words were, "they're just two smoldering sticks of firewood" (Isaiah 7:4b). YHWH also spoke directly to Ahaz saying, "Ask for a sign from YHWH your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky!" Now you have to realize that Ahaz wasn't really known for his piety – no one would mistake him for a religious man. So his response, "I will not ask! I will not put YHWH to a test!" was actually kind of hypocritical, maybe even a little comical. Ahaz probably realized that any sign from God of justice would not match his political or personal agenda.

Isaiah's comeback was priceless. Think how often you have tired of the sometimes meaningless and many times hypocritical words that are spewed from the mouths of politicians at all levels of our government. And then imagine this response, "Is it not enough for you to weary those around you, must you also weary my God?" After this rather sarcastic remark, Isaiah proceeds to give Ahaz a sign from God, even though he didn't want one. And it's the last sign that Ahaz would have asked for. Isaiah says, "This young woman will become pregnant and will give birth. You will name the child Immanu-EL."

So Isaiah is probably pointing to a young woman near them in Ahaz's court and it's probably this same young woman who is being told what name to use for her child. Some scholars even believe that the woman could have been Isaiah's wife, since Isaiah had a track record of giving his children unusual and prophetic names. So the sign from God was an infant with the name Immanu-EL. It

wasn't a mountain, a flash of lightning, a mighty army or a higher wall around Jerusalem. It was instead a symbol of vulnerability, a new-born baby, an infant with the name Immanu-EL.

EL, is short for Elohim, a Hebrew name for God. Immanu-EL, in Hebrew, means "God with us." This was Isaiah's way of saying to Ahaz, "Remember, you are not alone, YHWH is with you and your people. Maybe not the God you were looking for, but YHWH, nonetheless. In this infant you are receiving the sign of a God of love and compassion, rather than a God of anger and might. " Isaiah went on to say that by the time this infant is eating solid food - "curds and honey" – the two kingdoms that are about to attack you, will be already be overcome.

Would this sign from God help you with your fear? Would it calm your shivering? Would the birth of a tiny baby give you the courage, the hope, the strength to overcome your difficulties?

Every Christmas we celebrate just such as birth. Unlike the author of the gospel of Matthew, I don't believe Isaiah was foretelling Jesus' birth, but I do believe that Jesus' birth is a sign of "God with us." Every year we celebrate Jesus' birth because we recognize the God of Love in him, in his life, in his death, and in the way that he continues to live on through us.

Personally, it doesn't matter to me whether Mary was a virgin or not. What matters to me is that Jesus was born. What matters to me is that he was born to ordinary parents who, just like you and me, needed help and guidance when they

had difficult decisions to make. What matters to me is that Jesus was born and that through his life, his teachings and even his death we continue to have opportunities to know and understand more deeply the Holy Mystery, the Essence of Love, the God of Compassion

I want to finish by sharing with you a story that may be familiar to many of you. It is the story of *Silas Marner*, from the novel of the same name by George Eliot. Silas is a reclusive miser, left utterly devastated when his large stash of money is stolen. He comes home one day looking for his lost coin and finds instead a small child outside his door. These are the words that the author uses to describe Marner's reaction to the coming of this small being into his world:

He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far-off life; it stirred old quiverings of tenderness, old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some power presiding over his life. We older human beings feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in earth or sky.

The author explains that when Marner takes the child onto his lap he begins:

trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life. He could only have said that the child was come instead of the gold - that the gold had turned into this child.

In the novel we are told that this child, whom he named Eppie, loved sunshine, sounds, and every other thing in God's world. The author explains:

The gold had asked that he should sit weaving longer and longer, deafened to all things except the monotony of his loom; but Eppie called him away from his weaving, and made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life, warming him into joy because she had joy.

<https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/2017/09/god-became-small-preaching-advent.html>

It's true, God is with us. God appears in many forms and in many ways. Often we know Essence of love is present because the awe of the moment will make us quiver, or tremble or shiver. May we all know the hope, the peace, the joy and the love that is Immanu-EL, God with us.