

Signs of the Season: Signs and Faithfulness

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael –December 21 2025

4th Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25 NRSVUE

Reflection: Psalm 85

Call to Worship: I will sing of the Lord's loyal love forever. I will proclaim your faithfulness with my own mouth. Your loyal love is rightly built—forever! You establish your faithfulness in heaven. Who is like you, Lord God of heavenly forces? Mighty Lord, your faithfulness surrounds you! Your throne is built on righteousness and justice; loyal love and faithfulness stand in front of you. (Psalm 80)

Advent Candle Lighting: Today, with Mary and Joseph, we choose to wait, watch, and listen for the way of Love instead of responding in fear to the world's judgment. We light this candle of love as a sign of our faithfulness as we seek, find, and follow Emmanuel, God with us.

Prayer: Merciful God, you sent the prophets as your messengers to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to listen to their warnings and to let our lives be changed through your grace. Help us once more to celebrate the nativity, and that we may rejoice in the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer. Help us as we reflect on the signs of the season. Help us to understand your timing and truth as we hear stories of faithfulness throughout Advent. Guide us as we celebrate your glory and power as we share in this Christmas journey. May you help us to greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel, so that we may know peace and light. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 85

⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. ⁸ Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. ⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. ¹² The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³ Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.
(Psalm 85:7-13 NRSVUE*)

We read the words of Psalm 85, and we hear of God's faithfulness to his people. That the Lord watches over his flock and guides us in the paths of salvation. That God's steadfast love and faithfulness are always there for those who seek it. We hear how faithfulness and righteousness are with the Lord. How do you remember these things as you prepare your heart for our Emmanuel, God with us? How do you think about joy as we await the birth of our Savior? How do we prepare ourselves for hope? What are your prayers as we reflect on the birth of our Savior? Who can you lift up in your prayers this week? In what ways are you preparing for Christmas? What traditions do you hold dear? How is it that you will come to celebrate the birth of our Savior this year?

Prayer: Eternal God, we praise you for your presence with us. You sent your light into the world to dispel the darkness. We pray you will help us in our preparations for the coming of Jesus Christ, our true light. We thank you for your many blessings in this Advent season. We seek you in our prayers this day. We lift up our many joys that we may celebrate with you. We lift up our sorrows that you may wipe away our tears. We lift up both the prayers we have spoken aloud together and the silent pleadings that we hold in our hearts. For we know that you are never far from us and that you hear every prayer we raise to you. May we know your presence in our celebrations and our sorrows, in both laughter and tears. May we remember that you are always with us. May you grant us hope, peace, joy, and love as we celebrate a child born and laid in a manger. May our hearts be overflowing with your steadfast love and faithfulness all the days of our lives. And it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible. Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 7 verses 10 through 16.

¹⁰Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹“Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹²But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” ¹³Then Isaiah said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.
(Isaiah 7:10-16 NRSVUE*)

Our second reading is from Romans chapter 1, verses 1 through 7.

¹ 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 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷ To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1-7 NRSVUE*)

Our final reading is from Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 through 25.

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do

this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 NRSVUE)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This fourth Sunday of Advent brings us to signs and faithfulness. We are so close now to celebrating the birth of our Savior. It is right there just around the corner. The anticipation is high. I know my kids are excited for all the time that we're spending with family, for all the presents that will be under the tree, for the snacks that remind them that it is Christmas, and for the joy that we have in celebrating the birth of the Messiah.

It is that birth that we hear about in our reading from Matthew for today. But Matthew's focus isn't so much on the birth as it is on Joseph. Because Joseph is an example of faithfulness that we can look to as we look at the signs of the season. Now Joseph is a good guy. He's known to be a righteous man and he wants to do what is right. But he's found himself in a bit of a predicament. Joseph is engaged to Mary. But then he finds out that she's pregnant. I think at this point we have to make sure that we understand just how good of a guy Joseph is. The way that the rules are put in place, Mary should be shunned because she is having a baby outside of marriage and it's not Joseph's. By every right, he should have her brought before the community and have her shunned, if not worse. She should be disgraced and never looked upon again. This is at least how this would normally be handled. I point this out because Joseph doesn't plan on doing that. Being the good guy that he is, he's not going to expose her to public disgrace. He was just going to basically send her back quietly to her own people, to her family. He was going to break things off quietly and go his own way. I mention this because it shows that he is a very thoughtful and considerate person. That in this situation, he tries to do what is right and what is good. But then everything changes because Joseph has a dream. In this dream, an angel appears to him and tells him, it's okay. You can take Mary as your wife because the child is born of the Holy Spirit. And when she has this son, you should name him Jesus. Joseph hears this and he goes along with it. He takes it on faith. He trusts by faith that what the angel has said is true. Joseph's faith here is an incredible example of what it means to have a very strong faith.

What we hear in this also reflects what we hear from the prophet Isaiah. Matthew quotes Isaiah. In our reading from Isaiah, we hear there's going to be a sign. There'll be a sign that the young woman of the child and shall bear a son shall name him Emmanuel. Emmanuel means God is with us. The sign shall be that God will be with his people. And that is directly quoted in our reading from Matthew to talk about Jesus. In case you're wondering about the naming, I bring this up because this can be rather confusing because we hear in Isaiah, his name will be Emmanuel. And then in Matthew we hear he'll be named Jesus. One of the things that I always remind people of is that Hebrew names have meaning. And the name Emmanuel literally

means that he shall be God with us. The name isn't always that it is going to be his name. It's sometimes that that is his purpose. That is who he is. We can understand it better that way because it is that he is the Emmanuel. Because it is God with us. And Christmas brings us God with us. Jesus born, laid in a manger to be our savior, to lead us from the darkness into the light. And that by faith, we are given a sign that he'll choose good and teach us how to choose the good. That he will be an example to us of righteousness and faithfulness.

That it is this faithfulness that helps to guide us and lead us in all that we are. And it is what gives us hope, peace, joy, and love in this Advent season. We hear this from Romans when Paul speaks of Jesus and the gospel concerning his son, who is descended from David according to the flesh. That Joseph adopts this boy basically. And Joseph raises him and does a fine job of it. Jesus grows being fully human and fully divine. His birth signifies for us a sign of God's faithfulness that God is still with us. That Jesus comes with glory and faithfulness to be a reminder to us of what it looks like to be a good person. That we learn obedience by faith. That we learn to be kind and to be trusting. That we learn to care for each other. And that by faith, we are stronger because we remember. Because we remember Joseph's faithfulness, it helps us to be more faithful. Because we remember God's faithfulness and his sign in Isaiah, we learn to be more faithful and more trusting. We learn to love better and to be better.

I was thinking about this when I was thinking about the Christmas movies that I love. I've been using different examples from the movies I watch every year. I wanted to touch on a story that I take in in multiple ways every year. And that is A Christmas Carol. Because we can watch it in various forms. I've got at least 5 different versions of the story in movies alone. I just finished listening to the audiobook of the story. But there's something that always stands out to me in A Christmas Carol. And it is faithfulness. Because in that we have another person that has a vision that teaches them to be a better person. To have faith in people again. And part of that is that in the story, Ebenezer Scrooge loses track of what's important. Through a series of visitations from spirits, he learns to have faith in his fellow man again. Because he is reminded of God's goodness that is seen in our neighbor. In it, Scrooge is reminded of the true meaning of Christmas. Being able to share that joy together. Because God is with us. I was thinking about that because in all the different versions, Scrooge learns to keep Christmas. But it isn't just through the things we normally think of as Christmas traditions. Because Scrooge learns to do it by being kind and generous to the people around him. Because he learns to open up his heart and to share himself with the people around him. He has faith that God will help him to be the man he needs to be. I was reminded of all of that because it's what we see in our other readings today. That we see it in Matthew with Joseph's faithfulness. Trying to be the person that God needs him to be. We see it in Isaiah with God's faithfulness with people. That there will be a sign. That there will be something to be able to tell them what is to come. And that God has not abandoned them. We see it in Paul. Paul remembering that we are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

That in all of these things, we hear about signs and faithfulness because we hear about people who kept faith. Whether it be faith in God, faith in each other, faith in love, faith in hope, faith in peace. We keep faith when we trust that God will get us where we need to be with ourselves and with each other. And that God will make our hearts right again. That's what the birth of Jesus is all about. It is us allowing God to make our hearts right. That we must have faith that things will work themselves out. That God will show us the way to go. That it may be

unexpected. Joseph's plan was to get married to Mary and have a happy life together. Then he thought the plan was going to be to do the kind thing and send her away quietly. Then he once again had his heart and life changed and embraced that Mary was giving birth to a very special baby boy. And that God needed him to be there. By faith, Joseph holds fast to all of these changes.

I think it's a reminder to us of the way that we see the signs of the season. That we have to adapt and change to what's happening around us. Because maybe it's not plan A or plan B or plan C. But we keep having plans that we can make because God will always give us a way forward. And for me that's what Christmas is. A way forward. We continue to move ourselves ahead. That we work together and help one another in the love of Christ. We remember Christ's birth so that we remember that God always has a way forward for us all. So let us remember by faith that we are to walk always with hope, with peace, with joy, and with love as we steadily make our way to the manger and celebrate the miracle that is Christmas. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Signs of the Season

Our Advent series is “Signs of the Season.” Advent is the start of a new year of waiting, but it is an active and watchful waiting, observing the signs we see. We tap into the world’s longing for redemption, salvation, and transformation. We look forward to the time of God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. All of earth is waiting for this fulfillment. In worship, we can see the signs of the nearness of Emmanuel, God with us.

11/30: Signs and Times	12/7: Signs and Stories	12/14: Signs and Truths
12/21: Signs and Faithfulness	12/24: Signs and Glory	12/28: Signs and Powers
1/4: Signs and Journeys		

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752 Walnut
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Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St
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Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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Worship 9:30am

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