

Advent 4 – Vicar Lehne Sermon

Matthew 1:18-25: “God’s Signs Point to Salvation.”

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In Nomine Iesu

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O God, our heavenly Father, you have attached your promises to tangible signs so that we know that what you promised is true. Help us to never doubt your signs, but to receive your signs in faith. In your Son’s name we pray. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus’ name:

²⁰ [A]n angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is still with us today, dear fellow redeemed:

The people of this world pride themselves on being able to use their human reason to solve all their problems. They don’t need a God. They’re enlightened. However, no matter how “enlightened” the people of this world are, there are still times when they are faced with problems that they can’t solve on their own. So, what do they do in these moments? They lift their eyes to the heavens and say, “Give me a sign!” Yes, even the so called “enlightened” people of this world, who supposedly don’t need God, are at times faced with problems that cause them to hope that a higher power really does exist that can offer them guidance. However, the “higher power” that the people of this world turn to is usually the universe. The “signs” that the people of this world supposedly receive from the universe can be found in just about anything: a book that has been opened to a specific page; a song that is being played on the radio; how the stars in the sky are ordered and what they mean. However, if they were truly looking for signs that would help them solve their problems, they would not look to the “signs” that the universe supposedly gives them, but to the signs that God definitely gives them in his Word, for God’s signs point to salvation.

In our reading for today, we are told that Jesus being born of the Virgin Mary was a sign that God would save his people from their sins. However, the context in which this sign was promised to be given appears to be a bit strange. The prophecy that the sign would happen was given long ago, and by that time, the nation of Israel had split into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The current king of Judah, King Ahaz, had just found out that Israel had joined forces with Syria to wage war against Judah. And so, he was understandably afraid.

Therefore, God instructed the prophet Isaiah to comfort King Ahaz by reassuring him that the house of David would not fall but would be delivered. In addition to these words of comfort, King Ahaz was also told to ask God for a sign so that he would be able to attach his faith in God's promise to something tangible. However, King Ahaz did not have faith in God, so he refused to ask for a sign, making it appear as though he piously did not want to put God to the test. But God was not fooled, so he responded to King Ahaz by saying through Isaiah, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). This was not a sign that King Ahaz would see in his lifetime, nor would anyone who lived in Judah at that time. But, to those who believed in God, the promise of this sign comforted them and gave them hope for the future, hope that they would not just be delivered from their earthly enemies but also from their sins.

But this sign was not just meant to give hope to the believers who lived in Judah at the time. It was meant to give hope to all believers of all time, including you. The prophecy shows that it was not just the deliverance of his people in the nation of Judah that God had in mind, but also the deliverance of all his people from every nation. By preserving the house of David, God was preserving the line of the Savior, who would come from the house and line of David. That Savior would be no mere man, for a regular man would not even be able to deliver himself, let alone all people. No, that Savior would be God in the flesh, which is what Immanuel means: "God with us." And this God-man would deliver everyone from their sins, which is what Jesus means: "The LORD saves."

Even though we were not around to see the sign that God foretold would happen through Isaiah, God has revealed in his Word that it did happen, just as he said that it would. God inspired Matthew to write in our reading for today that "the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (verse 18). The Holy Spirit caused Mary to conceive, despite the fact that she was a virgin, and the baby that was conceived inside her was God in the flesh. Then, as if we needed it to be any clearer that this is how God fulfilled his prophecy to King Ahaz, Matthew goes on to say that "this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Isaiah]" (verse 22).

When the God-man, Jesus, came in the flesh, he experienced everything that you do. He didn't just experience the joys of life, but also the sorrows of life. He faced your temptations and overcame them. He even experienced everything that you rightfully deserved by taking all your sins on himself, suffering your punishment of hell, and dying on the cross in your place. Through all this, Jesus saved you from your sins, and now, life and salvation are yours.

Therefore, whenever you become afraid when faced with your sins and guilt, whenever you are struggling with temptation, or whenever you are going through a difficult time, Jesus assures you through his comforting Word that he has already delivered you from your sins and that he will be there with you to help you overcome your temptations and get through your difficult times. These words of comfort should be all we need to believe in him, but he has also given us tangible signs to attach his promises to, just like he did for King Ahaz. Those tangible signs are the means by which God brings his grace to us: his holy Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In holy baptism, the simple means of water is applied to us as his Word is spoken. Since God attaches his Word to the tangible element of water, we know that he is truly with us to give us faith and wash away our sins through those waters. In the Lord's Supper, the simple means of bread and wine, over which his Word was spoken during the Words of Institution, are fed to us. Since God attaches his Word to the tangible elements of bread and wine, we know that Jesus is truly with us to give us the forgiveness of sins through the bread and wine, which are his true body and blood. It is not the tangible elements themselves that we put our faith in, but they help us to remember what Jesus has truly accomplished through them and that he is still with us.

These are the tangible signs that God has given to us, and how God wants us to receive these signs is shown in Joseph. Our reading for today begins with Joseph finding out that Mary, the woman that he was betrothed to, was pregnant. Using his human reason, he assumed that Mary must have been unfaithful to him and committed adultery. We have the benefit of knowing that it was the Holy Spirit who caused Mary to conceive, but Joseph did not know this at the time. So, assuming that Mary was unfaithful to him was an understandable assumption.

Adultery was very serious in the Jewish community. According to the Old Testament law, if a woman was found guilty of committing adultery, she would be stoned to death. However, Joseph was a just and kind man. He didn't want Mary to be exposed to public shame and be stoned, so, he decided to divorce Mary as quietly as possible instead, which was the only way to break off a marriage in those days, after which her father would look after her for the remainder of her life.

However, before Joseph could carry out his plan, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him that the one who was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit: the promised Savior who would save his people from their sins whom Isaiah spoke of in his prophecy. Joseph now had two choices: believe what the angel of the Lord said to him and receive the sign of the virgin birth in faith or put his trust in his own human reason and divorce Mary, rejecting the sign. And Joseph, having faith, accepted the sign in faith and went through with taking Mary as his wife, as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

When we try to rely on our human reason more than God and his Word, it only causes us to doubt the words that God says and reject them. A child being born of a virgin? That's impossible! The evangelists must have actually added this later to make Jesus and Mary seem better than they were. Baptism being a work of God through which God gives us faith and washes away our sins? That's impossible! Baptism must actually be a human work that symbolizes the washing away of our sins and demonstrates our commitment to God. The bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper being the true body and blood of Jesus through which we receive the forgiveness of sins? That's impossible! The bread and the wine must actually symbolize Jesus' body and blood to remind us of what he did to forgive our sins. And these are only some of the ways in which we can reject what God has revealed to us in his Word.

If we reject God's signs, like King Ahaz did, then we no longer stand on God's promises, and our faith cannot endure. Without faith, we lose all the blessings that Jesus, the God-man, won for us on the cross: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. But when we receive God's signs

in the faith that God has given us, like Joseph did, we know that God has worked through his signs to bring us his blessings.

Because God works through these signs of Word and Sacrament to bring his blessings to us, we know that he is with us today. Jesus didn't come in the past only to leave us when he ascended into heaven. He is with all of us today, including you. And because Jesus saved you from your sins by his innocent death on the cross and experienced your struggles and hardships, you know that he will continue to bring you the forgiveness of sins and help you through your struggles and hardships today, as well as throughout the rest of your lives, until the day when you enter eternal life in heaven, where you will never struggle or face hardships ever again. In all of these ways that God is with us, we know that God's signs truly do point to salvation.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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