

**Love Paved the Way to Bethlehem**  
Fourth Sunday in Advent  
December 23, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007  
Gates Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

What was God thinking? Was God naïve? Does God think people will ever really change? Does God regret any decisions the Almighty has made? Like creating humans in the first place?

Those questions invite lightning from the heavens, [5 second wait] OK, five seconds and no lightning, despite today's weather reports to the contrary! However, what *are* we to make of our God Who is so persistent, that the Creating and Redeeming One would bother with humans who rarely get it right, who all too often only turn to God when things go awry, who are seemingly hard-wired to go about their business as they see fit; setting aside the ways and dreams of God?

As humans, we are incapable of fully understanding the mind and ways of God. We just can't do it. It is as we approach the end of Advent, on the Eve of Christmas Eve, that God's ways and mind are all the more inscrutable. In Advent, we traveled with hope towards the celebration of Christmas. We embraced Advent's promises as a star was added to each worship bulletin cover. We started with hope. We used that as a foundation as we remembered God's promise of peace. Then we heard the invitation of God to be a people of joy. Today, all of that culminates as we again embrace God's promise and gift of love. As we embrace hope, peace, joy and love, we remember how Joseph and Mary faced the reality of Mary's unexpected pregnancy and, encouraged by the angel's promises, traveled with hope to Bethlehem – and beyond.

The words from Isaiah we heard this morning ... these words held and continue to hold such promise: the promise of a virgin bearing One to be called Immanuel, words fulfilled in what we read from the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. But, in that brief passage of Isaiah, there were actually *more* words about the coming judgment of God's people, consequences for their misdeeds. We know, with hindsight, that Isaiah's prophecy came true as Israel in the north and Judea in the south fell to invading armies over the span of one hundred and fifty years. We *also* know that Isaiah's words about the birth of Immanuel, the Messiah, spoken in the eighth century B.C. would not come to fruition for those nearly eight hundred years! I repeat what I have said before, that we need to remember the span of time that the Old Testament covers, that Abraham lived nearly as long before the birth of Jesus as we of today live after the events of Christmas.

Isaiah tiptoes around some of the same questions I just posed. Isaiah suggests that the peoples' behavior might be wearying to God – as though God could or might be exhausted with the foolishness of the Creator's Chosen People. We, like Isaiah, know better. God does not get exhausted. God "rested" on the proverbial seventh day after the work of creation, but if you had been at work for billions of years and had just created your masterpiece, you might want some time off as well! And there we have it – God's masterpiece. After everything else was created, God made man and woman and *was glad to have done so!* For Isaiah to suggest God might get weary, or for me to suggest that God might regret making humans who would exercise the gift of free will and turn around and ignore their Maker – that attributes human characteristics and behavior to our God. And, thank God, we know better. God is far above behaving as we do!

As we traveled with hope in during Advent, we grappled with how to be a people of hope, peace and joy. On this fourth Sunday of Advent we explore what it means to be a people of love and recognize that it was and is God's love that brought us here in the first place. It is God's love that beckons to us like stars in the heavens and it is love that continues to challenge us to heed the ways of God and forego the ways of humans. In the "Infant Narratives" found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we read of the angel appearing to Zechariah, John the Baptist's father and to Mary. Today we read of the assurances that came to Joseph: that he should go ahead and be wed to Mary in spite of her "condition." Joseph, the man, was prepared to have nothing to do with this woman who was inexplicably pregnant, but, reminded of Isaiah's prophecy, God's message of love, promise and hope, Joseph's mind was changed.

The story of the Bible is about God's continued love for God's people. To chart the faithfulness of the Chosen People might be to draw the design of a complicated modern roller coaster with its ups and downs, twists, backward spiral, all creating G-forces that try to defy gravity – much like human behavior that sometimes defies logic and certainly defies the commandments of God! Through it all, God never gives up – and here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, just one day before Christmas Eve realizing that everything, all of human history, all of the kingdoms that rose and fell, all of the people who lived and died, loved and thrived – everything pointed, was directed, and focused on an event in the City of David in the Kingdom of Judah later known as Judea on the outskirts of the Capital City, Jerusalem. History tells us that at one time all roads led to Rome, but let there be no mistake about it: all of God's paths are paved with God's love and are directed at a place far more humble in the eyes of humans but all the more glorious in the eyes of God – Bethlehem, a sleepy little, no-account town, off the beaten path, where all the world's hopes and dreams were fulfilled in the birth of a baby in a manger for cows, in straw intended for cows' consumption, in the presence of all the smells, sights and sounds that only a cow stall can create. That is where the greatest event in all of human history occurred, the ultimate gift of a God Who realized that the only way to finally get through to this thick-skulled people of the Almighty's making was to go and become one of them – and love meant that the arrival would be as seemingly humble, inconspicuous and unremarkable as possible – so that over time, we would realize this gift of love, the Christ, was and is the most profound of all.

It is not lost on us – just because it is Advent and not even Christmas yet – it is not lost on us where all of this eventually lead – we know the path of love that invites a focus on Bethlehem eventually takes us a few miles north to Jerusalem and to a hill on the outskirts of the capital where the humble life would meet a bloody end – but that too is part of the incredible love this God has for all of us. The same love that paved the way to Bethlehem moved throughout all of Judea and Galilee and came full circle to Jerusalem and the cross, the tomb and the resurrection.

But we do not lose sight of how – or that – the wondrous gift was given, how the persistent love of God invites, cajoles and persuades us to overcome our sins, our brokenness, our selfishness, our self-centeredness, even our sadness, despair and loneliness – so that we might be the people God invites us to be – and so that we will discover that our life's path, like the one that led to the Bethlehem of history, is replete with love, energized with love, paved with love – that we, by the grace of the loving God, might occasionally get it right – and be the people of love – the people of God.

Amen.