

## What's Love Got to Do With It?

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matt. 1:18-25

Every now and then one of you will come up to me after a sermon on a particularly tricky scripture reading and say something like, *Wow, I was wondering how you were going to pull that off*, or *I couldn't figure out how you were going to bring that one together and make sense of it*.

I wondered that same thing this week. How on earth am I going to write a sermon about love that comes out of either of these two scripture readings and not have it seem artificial or contrived? That's one of the disadvantages of planning ahead, or at least adopting themes ahead of time before you really get a chance to study the readings that are linked to each of the themes. You might be setting yourself up for a rough week.

The reading from Isaiah is the second part of an ongoing conversation between the King of Judah, Isaiah and God that probably requires a bit of explanation. At its heart, this is a story of political intrigue. Judah's neighbors to the north, Syria and Israel, are vassal states to the superpower of Assyria, but the two kings decide that they have had enough. The time has come to stage a rebellion and fight off the yoke of their oppressor. The problem is they can't do it alone, they need help and the help they want is from Ahaz' army. But he doesn't want any part of it. So instead of turning their sights on Assyria, they turn on Ahaz and threaten to blockade Jerusalem until he either caves or is dead, and they can put a puppet monarch on the throne who will do their bidding. Ahaz sees the handwriting on the wall, and he is terrified.

So God sends Isaiah to assure Ahaz that nothing is going to happen to him, and in fact that he doesn't need to give the matter a second thought because in two years' time Israel and Syria will be gone and the kings will be nothing more than 'smoldering stumps.' All Ahaz has to do is put his trust in God.

That's where we come into the story with today's reading, and apparently Ahaz is still plagued with indigestion and losing sleep at night over the whole matter, because God makes him an offer: ask for proof; a sign. Anything, big or small, you name it. And when Ahaz demurs, God gives him a sign anyway: before this young woman, quite possibly Isaiah's own wife, has her baby and that baby is weaned, Israel and Syria will have fallen, and will be out of your hair forever. Judah will be safe.

So that's the Old Testament reading. If we turn to the gospel reading we get one of our very few real glimpses at Joseph. To say that he and Mary were engaged is somewhat misleading. They didn't have rings and a china pattern picked out. What they had was a legally binding contract between their parents, stating that they would be married to each other at some point in time in the future.

So when Mary came up "with child," and assuming it has happened in the usual way, to Joseph's mind it really amounted to breaking two laws – the first was what we might think of today as a moral law, and the second was the breaking of a binding contractual agreement. And remember that these weren't civil laws; these were religious laws, God-given laws. And because Joseph

was a righteous man – meaning that he did what was right in God’s eyes, and obeyed Jewish law- he **had** to ‘divorce’ Mary. She had broken the law; she was a sinner. He couldn’t marry her.

In the immortal words of Tina Turner, what’s love got to do with it? Joseph didn’t do what he did out of kindness or compassion or love, he did it because he was righteous, a religious man. And as for Ahaz, there’s nothing in that story even remotely sentimental or devout. In fact, Isaiah has only harsh words to say about him, accusing him of making both his own people and God ready to gnaw their own limbs off in frustration over him.

If our bulletins didn’t already have the word “LOVE” splashed all over the front of it, I might suggest a more obvious, less contrived theme for this morning, like, sometimes doing the right thing is the wrong thing to do.

Again, kids, I’ve said this before; this is not a blanket statement! Do not take this as encouragement, permission, etc. to do stuff you know you aren’t supposed to do! Context is everything. In Ahaz’ case, it was his job as king to protect his people, to provide for their welfare. And their safety, as well as his, was being threatened by the neighborhood bullies. And what do we tell our kids? If someone is harassing you, tell someone; a parent, someone. Get help. So that’s what Ahaz did. He went to the king of Assyria and told him that, not only were two of his minions hassling him, they were planning a revolt.

That’s good strategic thinking, if you are the king of a tiny, not-so-strong country. Find yourself a giant to come to your aid. Keep your people from being starved out or taken captive or killed outright. Do your monarchical duty to your people however you can.

The only problem is that Ahaz wasn’t just any king; he was the king of Judah. He sat on the throne of David, and that meant that he not only had the usual obligations as a ruler, he also had the commandments of God to keep, and those two aren’t always compatible. Doing the right thing in this case wasn’t just a matter of forming a strategic political alliance. It was a religious one, a theological one – Ahaz was looking to Assyria for help, not God. Isaiah told Ahaz that the only thing he needed to do was trust God to deal with Israel and Syria in God’s own way and own time. But Ahaz didn’t. He took matters into his own hands and, essentially, went looking to other gods.

And then there is Joseph, righteous Joseph. Doing the right thing for him meant following the Law as it was prescribed in this particular situation. The Law that God himself had given. Hard to find fault in that, isn’t it? Unless angels come to you and tell you otherwise, and you can find a way to trust that, as unlikely as it sounds, as unbelievable as it is, God’s purposes are being worked out smack dab in the craziness of it all.

It’s a worthy theme with a worthwhile message – there will be times that we need to let go of the right, expedient, sensible, logical, take a deep breath and take a flying leap off the cliff and into the waiting arms of God. Sometimes in life, being God’s people means that being faithful means needing a huge dose of trust instead of a boatload of common sense.

But is it an Advent theme? As long as we tell the stories the way we did, as long as we call them stories about political strategy and the kinds of corners that human beings find themselves in sometimes when there are no good choices to make, the truth of the matter is that it is nearly impossible to start with a story about mere mortals and their endeavors and end up with something incisive to say about love.

But those stories we've just told aren't just stories about human beings and their endeavors, are they? They are stories about God, and the lengths that God is willing to go to for us. They are stories of people who encounter Emmanuel, God with us – in the midst of politics, in the midst of domestic strife, even in the midst of organized religion! They are stories about people discovering that God is with us, right there in the thick of it. Looking after us. Keeping us. Holding us. Saving us. Loving us. There are signs of it everywhere, from the rainbow in the sky to the baby born in the manger.

All you have to do is pay attention.

What's love got to do with it? Everything. All of our stories, all of our endeavors, all of our struggles take on a completely different light when you flip them around and look at them through God's lens, not ours. What can look like a morass of impossible choices, desperate situations, and overwhelming odds, begins to look like opportunities for grace and peace and hope and salvation. Why? Because then we can see that the God of love comes to us in the grit and grime and, yes, the glory of our lives, over and over and over again.

The wonder of Christmas isn't simply the sweet baby Jesus nestled in his bed of straw, warmed by the breath of cattle and sheep, and adored by peasants and kings alike. The wonder of Christmas is that God loved us enough to be born as one of us.

And that is what love's got to do with it.