

Sermon
December 22, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Advent Promises: A Child Named Immanuel
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

Thirty-seven years ago on June 11, 1982 through the power of the big screen and the imagination of Steven Spielberg an extra-terrestrial character named E.T came to life. Widely recognized as one of the greatest films of all time it chronicles a friendship between a young boy named Elliott and the extra-terrestrial character E.T. On Thanksgiving E. T. came back into our world when he reappeared in a new nostalgic Xfinity commercial that has been showing clips of the four minute film over the last month. Have you seen them? When I saw the first one I broke out into a smile for this film brings back so many powerful memories for me. And as E.T. cried out for Elliott and Elliott, now a father of two, appears in the snow, I thought the same thing Elliott did - “You came back!” If you haven’t seen the entire commercial you can view it at xfinity.com/et. If you loved the movie E.T. this short film is bound to warm your hearts this holiday season for it is a message of love and family.

For me, E.T. was not only a powerful story of friendship but it was the promise that E.T. left with Elliott that always stuck with me. When E. T. was about to leave he pointed his finger at Elliott’s heart and as the finger throbbed with a bright red light E.T said “I’ll be right here.” His promise was that he would always be with Elliott in his heart and Elliott would always be with him in his heart. The new commercial takes the promise to the next generation as it is Elliott’s son whose heart lights up as he too has come to know and love E.T. For friends, that is what happens when we believe the Advent promise for God is with us even when we must say goodbye to those we love and when struggles come in our lives.

Phyllis Martin, a schoolteacher in Columbus, Ohio, told of the day some years ago when the

storm clouds and strong gusts of wind came up suddenly over the Alpine Elementary School. The school public address system blared tornado warnings. It was too dangerous to send the children home. Instead, they were taken to the basement where the children lined the walls and huddled together in fear. She said the teachers were worried, too.

To help ease the tension, the principal suggested a sing-along. But the voices were weak and unenthusiastic. One child after another began to cry. The children could not be consoled and were close to panic. Then one of the teachers, whose faith seemed equal to any emergency, whispered to the child closest to her, "Kathy, I know you are scared. I am too, but aren't we forgetting something? There is a power greater than any storm. God will protect us. Just say to yourself, 'God is with us,' then pass the words on to the child next to you and tell her to pass it on." Suddenly that dark and cold basement became a sacred place as each child in turn whispered around the room those powerful words, "God is with us," "God is with us," "God is with us." A sense of peace and courage and confidence settled over the group.

Phyllis Martin said, "I could hear the wind outside still blowing with such strength that it literally shook the building, but it did not seem to matter now. Inside the fears subsided and tears faded away. When the all-clear signal came some time later, students and staff returned to the classrooms without the usual jostling and talking. "Through the years" she said, "I have remembered those calming words. In times of stress and trouble, I have been able again and again to find release from fear or tension by repeating those calming words: 'God is with us!' 'God is with us!'"

(<https://sermons.com/sermon/the-christmas-promise-god-with-us/1346240>)

That my friends is the Advent promise that was given both in the Old Testament and the New Testament lessons today. The promise of a child named Immanuel for the name Immanuel with an I in the Old Testament and an E in the New Testament means "God is with us." And it is this child -

the child whose birth we remember every year that gives us hope.

In our Old Testament lesson God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz of Judah. Ahaz is threatened by the armies of northern Israel and Syria. It is 734 BC in this text during what is known as the Syro-Ephraimitic war. A century earlier, the small states along the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean had banded together to successfully ward off the Assyrian Empire. But Assyria was threatening again. King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Syria wanted King Ahaz of Judah to join them to fight off the enemy. When he refused they assembled to march against Judah.

In the midst of this crisis the Lord spoke to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah. The Lord told Ahaz that if he would trust in the Lord that the Lord would preserve the Davidic kingdom that he ruled over and he would destroy Israel and Syria. All Ahaz needed to do was believe the promise. The Lord even offered to provide a sign to Ahaz so he could believe the prophet's words. Ahaz could choose whatever sign he wanted. Hear the Lord's words from Eugene's Petersen's *The Message*: "*Ask for a sign from your God. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!*" Can you imagine what you would have answered? What sign you would have asked for? You can ask for anything!

But what did Ahaz do...he refused the sign saying he couldn't make demands of God. Trying to sound pious. But the truth was he had already summoned Assyria to his aid. He had made his decision. And yet God still provided a sign. The sign would be a young woman who would bear a son and name him Immanuel which means God-with-us. The sign was a sign not only to Ahaz but also to the people of Judah that God was with them. The only requirement was faithfulness. Something Ahaz proved not to be but the king's lack of faithfulness did not negate the promise to the people. History proved that what Isaiah prophesied happened and the Davidic Kingdom was defeated leading to years in captivity in Babylon but the people remembered the promise and held out hope for the one who would come. The one who was to be named Immanuel.

When the story of the birth of Christ was retold the prophet's words were remembered.

Matthew recounted the story from Joseph's perspective. He was engaged to be married to Mary but she had just told him she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph had decided that he would dismiss her quietly for he was a kind man. But an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him the child she was carrying would come to save his people from their sins. And here again we find the reminder of the promise from God that Isaiah had proclaimed years before that "*a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel which means God is with us.*"

I find it striking that Joseph's response to these words was the exact opposite of King Ahaz's response. Joseph trusted the angel's words and believed that this sign was from God. Joseph did as the angel commanded, married Mary and named the child as he had been instructed. He named him Jesus. And yet it is the name Immanuel that embodies the Advent promise for us. It is why we sing "*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*" every Advent for it is the promise of a child named Immanuel who would come and live among us bringing God into our world in flesh and blood that changed our world forever. For this baby born in a lowly manger in the little town of Bethlehem came to save us from our sins. It is the very fact that through our relationship with this baby, this child, this man who died for us that we have come to know God in powerful ways. Following the resurrection when Jesus appeared to the disciples in Galilee his final words were "*I will be with you always...*" And he is, my friends, for he is Immanuel - God with us.

Friends, this was E.T.'s promise to Elliott. It is God's promise to us. The baby born in the manger is Emmanuel - God with us forever for he lives in our hearts as we seek to follow him. As we reflect upon this Advent promise we have a choice - to respond as Ahaz did ignoring God's promise or to respond as Joseph did trusting the sign from God. Will we believe the Advent promise that God is with us and make the same kind of choices that Joseph made so long ago?

Choices to live trusting God's promise in the midst of a world in chaos. Choices of good over evil, kindness over cruelty, generosity over selfishness. Choices for the greater good above our own needs and wants. We have a choice and yet the Advent promise is that the sign was given regardless of our choice. A child has been born whose name is Immanuel... Thanks be to God for this gift!