**Sermon Text**: Isaiah 7:10-17

**Occasion**: Fourth Sunday of Advent, 18 Dec 2022

**God Being With Us**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

***10****Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz:****11****“Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.”****12****But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.”****13****And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also?****14****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)

During the past few weeks of Advent, I’ve focussed on preaching about Christ coming to us; that is, Christ coming on the Last Day to deliver us from all evil. We want Christ to come be with us now so that we may not remain in the pain and suffering of the world. This is a little different from the typical emphasis of Advent which is Christ coming to us in the manger, being born on Christmas Day. This coming of God to be with us is so that he may take on human flesh and go to the cross for the salvation of humanity. Both at the manger and on the Last Day, God will be with us, but we might want something different for God to be truly with us. Christmas looks to the past and the second coming of Jesus looks to the future, so what about the present? Where is God with us right now? It does not mean much to us if Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us, yet absent.

But God is truly present with us. Often in my sermons I bring to remembrance that the Lord is present in His Word and Sacrament. Jesus Christ promises to be exactly where he says he will be. He is the Word made flesh to be born on Christmas Day (John 1:14) and his words found in the scriptures give us life by his will (6:63). The Holy Spirit washes away our sins with the blood of Christ in Holy baptism (Titus 3:5-7; 1 John 5:6-8), and if the Holy Spirit dwells within us, then He is constantly joining us to Christ Jesus through faith. And of course, the most direct way for our God to be with us is for him to make his own flesh and blood present in the bread and wine of holy communion (Matt 26:26-29). All of these things are God being with us and delivering us His grace.

Yet, this is not always what people desire when they want God with them. They do not want words, water, or wine. They want a living, breathing Lord who will stand by them through times of trial. The world is not always a nice place to live and we need someone to uphold us when times are tough. We want someone to be sympathetic to our needs—all our needs whether they be physical, emotional, social, or spiritual. We know there is grace in the Word and Sacrament but we desire more.

This was why God spoke to King Ahaz in the days of Isaiah and said to ask for a sign as deep as Sheol or high as heaven. The Lord knows we desire comfort so greatly that we will let our hopes reach as high as the heavenly realms and, if our hopes become shattered, they fall down to the depths of the earth. The Lord, knowing the hearts of humanity, gave instruction to ask for the full glory of His heavenly kingdom. Yet, we don’t want to be too presumptuous. We do not want to ask God for what we can grasp by our own hands or for anything too miraculous. But is not the worldly and the miraculous exactly what God directs us to request of Him?

The Lord’s prayer which we repeat time and time again is always asking for everything our bodies and spirits need for life extending to eternity. You might focus on requesting your daily bread—the things God provides to us for our everyday lives, but the Lord invites us to pray for so much more in the Lord’s prayer. We explicitly ask for the kingdom of heaven to come down amongst us here on earth. “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We are praying that our Lord in the heavens above bring down the heavens that the blessedness of His heavenly kingdom be amongst us. We are asking that the throne of God on high may be here upon the earth so we may gather around our king here in this world. So, if we are already reaching into the heavens in the Lord’s prayer, perhaps we should not be skittish about asking for the Lord to be with us.

And we know that the Lord is truly with us in prayer. If you desire to be with the Lord, then you will find Him in prayer. He always listens to His children in the faith. He is never far off. He is always present in His word. Praying to Him with the words He has provided for us in scripture means that He is present with us in the Spirit and talking to us in holy conversation. God is with us in prayer.

And fundamentally this is what we want, for God to be down here with us. We want a personal connection with our Lord and Saviour where we can freely talk with Him so that we may request deliverance from every vile thing present in the world as well as for fixes to all the world’s problems. Our grandest wishes for Christmas should not be limited to a new fire engine, two front teeth, or whatever computer game console has just come out. Christmas is about God coming down to dwell among His people, living with them that He might save them. We should honour the Christmas season by asking for just that.

Now, we truly do receive this in Word and Sacrament. We do have the promise of salvation right here in front of us where the Lord forgives us our sins. We also rely on His promise that He is present where He works forgiveness. So, we have the assurance that God is present, although not exactly face to face with our Lord. This can trouble us. We can feel alone when we are crying out to God and hear silence. Not everything we pray for will come about. Diseases may not be cured if we ask, nor the dead raised. Even the more common stuff like guidance on certain issues or help in work or relationships. But none of this means that God does not hear, and it certainly does not mean God is not there.

God has not spoken directly to the vast majority of people throughout time. Isaiah received the voice of the Lord at appointed times for appointed purposes, but this was not the norm for most people. If God speaking like He did to Isaiah was the norm, then we would expect to find a few million more books in the Bible named after people. As it stands, there are only forty-some authors of holy scripture. But God does still speak. He spoke to King Ahaz through the mouth of Isaiah, and the Lord also speaks to us through the written words of the prophet Isaiah. It is just as true today as it was 2700 years ago that God would come into this world to be with His people on Christmas Day and deliver them from the evil in this world. When we are concerned about our lives, we can always look to the truth that Christ has come for our salvation and be comforted.

We may not have all the specifics we might want. We may not have a booming voice from the heavens like at the time of Job, nor do we have a still small voice like how God spoke to Elijah, but God continues to speak to us through His word. It is not about us demanding God be where we are at, but us going to where God promises to be. And since He promises to be with us in His Word, in His sacraments, and in the holy conversation of prayer, we will truly be with Him in worship. It is here in these things that we know God is with us and will remain beside us, even when we feel alone in this world.

And when we meditate upon the Word of God we find that Christ says in the gospel of Matthew that surely he is with us until the end of this age (Matt 28:20). We know Christ is present with his Church always. He may not be here bodily among us in the same way he was bodily with the Twelve Disciples, but he is still with us. He will never leave nor forsake us but always be only a prayer away, we need only call upon him. And in the prayer that Jesus has given us, the Lord’s prayer, Jesus has instructed us to request the Lord bring His heavenly kingdom down among us. This will happen at the end of the age when Jesus will come bodily.

When this will be is difficult to say. After all, when we look to God’s word given to the prophet Isaiah, God does not give Isaiah a timeframe on the Messiah. Isaiah does see a child of promise being born of a maiden in his own day (cf. Isa 8:1-8) to know the Lord is with the kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BC, but Isaiah does not live until the Christchild is born from a virgin over 700 years later. While we do not know all the specifics, we can say with certainty that Jesus is coming bodily. Jesus himself gives us this promise at the close of the book of Revelation, not talking about Christmas but about the true coming of the kingdom. Jesus declares, “Surely, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. (Rev 22:20)

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev 22:21)