

Pastor Letter: Difficult Decisions (12/18/22)

As I was in the middle of preparing this week's sermon topics, worship liturgies, and hymns, I received a telephone call from a former parishioner. He informed me that his wife had gone to be with the Lord during the night. She had suffered from a lingering illness for many years. The caller shared with me several very difficult decisions he was required to make concerning her declining health, medical care, funeral arrangements, and memorial services. He shared his rollercoaster ride of various emotions at the end of her life.

My heart went out to him as he told me of the family's decision to remove the life sustaining breathing tube from their beloved wife and mother. Much to their surprise the woman rallied enough to the point that they were able to sing some of their favorite hymns and celebrate a glorious family reunion before her passing a few hours later.

This week's scripture passages surrounding the 4th Sunday of Advent also deals with individuals who were required to make some very difficult choices. Our Old Testament passage is a very familiar story that comes from the prophet, Isaiah. The northern tribes of Israel had formed a political alliance with Syria against their powerful neighbor, Assyria. Israel and Syria were pressuring Ahaz, the king of Judah, to join their alliance or they would overrun the small nation of Judah themselves. The political advisors to Ahaz were urging the king to pay tribute to Assyria and become a vassal state to her.

Since Ahaz was from the blood-line of king David, Isaiah counseled Ahaz to remember God's covenants with Israel and David, and to place his trust in the Lord's authority instead of relying upon military power. Isaiah instructed Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign of divine assurance, but the king refused, "Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test," (Isa. 7:10-12).

Discerning the king had already chosen a military option, Isaiah gave Ahaz a visible sign from God, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted," (vv. 14-16). Historically, Israel and Syria soon ceased to exist as threatening nations just as the sign from the Lord stated.

Since Ahaz lacked the faith to trust in the Lord or in the prophecies of Isaiah, he felt his only options were in an alliance with Israel / Syria or becoming a vassal of Assyria. His decision was not between good vs. bad but between bad vs. worst. Whatever Ahaz choose would mean doom and gloom for the small nation of Judah. Consequently, God's judgment came upon Judah for their lack of a commitment to the Covenant with the Lord.

The New Testament writers also document some very significant figures making some very important and lifechanging decisions in this Advent and Christmas seasons. A servant girl, Mary, is posed with a challenging dilemma, "The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'"³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God,'" (Luke 1:30-35). Knowing the social ramifications of her decision, Mary agrees to serve the Lord, "For nothing will be

impossible with God. Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her," (vv. 37-38). Luke remembers the Old Testament sign to Ahaz.

Joseph is betrothed to Mary when he realizes she is going to have a baby. Since he loves Mary, he decides to secretly divorce her so no public shame will befall Mary. Matthew records, "But just when he (Joseph) had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" (Matt. 1:20-23). Joseph decides to accept Mary's situation and continue with the marriage. Matthew remembers the OT sign to Ahaz.

The New Testament writer, Paul, is writing a systematic theology letter to a Roman church that he has never visited. He highlights the items of his letter in his salutation with the words, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ," (Romans 1:1-6). Paul remembers the OT sign to Ahaz as well as the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Lord's fulfillment of other OT prophecies.

I trust that the most difficult decision that you have to make this Advent season is what Christmas gift to purchase for that special someone on your shopping list or whether to have turkey, ham, or roast beef for Christmas dinner. The Advent and Christmas seasons are shrouded in very significant decisions made by those Biblical characters we observe in the manger scenes that decorate our sanctuaries and homes.

As a pastor, I also realize that there are very significant personal decisions that we are required to make all year long. Not all of those are made public or shared with me. While the holiday seasons are a joyous time for most people, a few individuals find this time of year a reminder of the heart-wrenching choices they made or are having to currently make at this time of year. The telephone call from the previous parishioner who just lost his wife to a slow-moving terminal disease is one of these. Another example is the decisions that the United Methodist Churches and Pastors are having to make concerning the upcoming reorganization of their denomination.

As each of us make those heart-wrenching choices, keep in mind the visual image of the OT Immanuel or the NT Emmanuel signs which mean "God is with us." Almighty God was behind the choices that Ahaz, Mary, Joseph, or Paul made in our scripture passages. The Lord left his heavenly throne, became one of us, suffered for our sins, died on a criminal's cross, and rose from the dead, creating an avenue for us to obtain eternal life.

While my recent telephone caller informed me of his wife's passing, he was also rejoicing because his wife was finally healed of her terminal illness, and was dancing in the fields of glory with her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Remember the OT sign to Ahaz.

Pastor Larry