

Christ the King Lutheran Church – Houston, TX

**Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 21, 2025**

Isaiah 7:10–16; Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19; Romans 1:1–7; Matthew 1:18–25

Grace and peace to you, my Christ the King family, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent! This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

My spouse, Jennifer, is an artist and a weaver. She calls sermons and worship services – that she appreciates -- tapestries to God's glory, when all the diverse pieces somehow weave together and proclaim GOOD NEWS and rich meaning. I mention tapestries, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, because today is a tapestry Sunday, when all of the pieces come together beautifully, and we have an opportunity to behold the glory of it all.

Our Christmas celebration is just around the corner! All four Advent candles are now lit. The nativity characters, which, according to our congregational tradition, have been moving around the nave in this preparatory season, are approaching the altar for our Christ-Mass again. Everywhere we go it's beginning to look and sound a lot like Christmas.

On each of the Sundays of Advent, the texts and Pr. Derr's messages have been preparing us wonderfully. On the First Sunday of Advent, back on the last day of November, he welcomed us to Advent and reminded us that "Advent encourages us to orient our lives and shape our times now around the template of the new world to come, not the old world to go." Then we had two weeks of John the Baptizer. (You do know, right, that every year we can't get to Christmas without two weeks of John the Baptist pointing us to the One who is to come – every year?) Preaching on that, Pr. Derr first told us Ronald Reagan's joke about optimists and pessimists, as we heard John the Baptist call his critics "you brood of vipers," and then Pr. Derr

proclaimed that “There ALWAYS is a Savior in here [in our situations] somewhere! And he is for you, for us!” Then last Sunday, the ROSE candle Sunday, another John the Baptist Sunday, Pr. Derr reminded us that “hardship always hides behind hope,” and that, though John the Baptizer must have known that his would not be a happy ending, he dedicated his life to pointing to someone else, the Coming One.

And that brings us to TODAY, the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday before the Christ-Mass. Advent invites us into waiting, but not a passive or anxious waiting – a hopeful waiting rooted in God’s promises. Today is a tapestry in a tapestry. All of our texts weave into a marvelous story of God at work to save us, even when we, as those before us have been, are in terrible messes and sometimes do not know how there can be hope. The readings today are nothing less than a tapestry, woven across centuries, culminating in a simple, astonishing story: the birth of Jesus.

The Old Testament reading brings us to a king who’s terrified. Ahaz is caught in political crisis, and Yahweh, the Lord, offers him a sign – a divine reassurance. We only have a few verses in our reading from a much longer story, but Ahaz refuses God’s offer, not out of faith, but out of fear disguised as piety. Still, God insists through the words of the prophet: “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.” Immanuel, which means God-with-us. It’s a promise of presence even when fear overwhelms. It is a promise that God’s faithfulness isn’t contingent on our worthiness or even our willingness. God comes anyway!

Then our psalmody today: “Restore us, O God!” Did you hear the longing of people who feel forgotten? “Stir up your strength, and come to help us.” The psalmist gives the cry – the human heart aching for God to act. This is Advent in a sentence: the longing for God to show up, to shine light into the shadows, to give us life.

Then our Romans text: The very first words of Paul's letter to people in Rome whom he had never met. He steps into this story with the clarity of one who has seen the promise fulfilled. He speaks of the gospel – the good news -- “promised beforehand through the prophets,” of God's Son “descended from David according to the flesh,” and “declared to be Son of God with power...by resurrection from the dead.” There's a Presbyterian congregation in Houston, St. John's Presbyterian Church in Meyerland. Every year their Christmas display in their churchyard is exactly the same thing – a beautifully lit simple manger with a cross behind it. That's it – a manger and a cross! Paul reminds us that the manger is never far from the cross, and the cross is never far from the empty tomb.

And lastly the evangelist Matthew gathers all these fragments and tells his Christmas story.

[By the way, ancient writers writing a biography were only interested in two things about important people – their pedigree (i.e., who they are and where they'd come from) and what they did with their lives. Birth narratives were not important....Our accounts of Jesus are all about Jesus' ministry, passion, death and resurrection – that's it in all four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) – there is hardly anything about Jesus' birth and early life before his ministry, except his pedigree (genealogies in Matthew and Luke) and continual identifying of whom Jesus is. Mark has nothing about his birth. John has only the marvelous poetry – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and lived among us....” We'll ponder that one on Christmas Day. Luke's story is the one many of us have memorized which we'll read again on Christmas Eve – “In those days there went out a decree from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered....” That's it – very few details of Jesus' life before he was 30 years old.]

Today we have a very unique story – Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus. Where we hear a lot about Mary in Luke's Gospel, we hear about mostly

about Joseph in Matthew's narrative.

Joseph is a righteous man facing a situation he does not want and cannot understand. Mary is pregnant, and Joseph knows the child is not his. His heart must have been torn – love for Mary, the weight of honor, the whisper of shame. He resolves to do the compassionate thing quietly. But, like with Ahaz in the first reading, God interrupts him: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.” Nearly every time we hear in the Scriptures “Do not be afraid,” it means God is doing something only God can do.

- Joseph learns that the child conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit.
- He learns that the child will be named Jesus, which means “God saves.”
- He learns that this is a fulfillment of the sign given to Ahaz when he was in a terrible mess: A young woman will conceive and bear a son, and he will be called “Emmanuel,” which means, God-with-us.”
- Joseph wakes up and obeys. He takes Mary as his wife and she bears the Child, and he is named “Jesus.” Joseph adopts him, and they become family. Joseph's obedience isn't loud, but it is faithful. It's the obedience of someone who trusts the promises of God more than his own understanding. As my cousin Pr. Ron Roschke comments, “Jesus comes to save, and mysteriously Joseph enters into the same vocation, saving Mary from humiliation and death as their life stories get grafted into the narrative of the Child.” As we weave together the tapestry of Advent and the tapestry of these lessons today, Joseph becomes our companion—a reminder that faith is often quiet, courageous and costly.

What Does This Mean for Us?

Martin Luther famously asked again and again, “Was ist das?” – which we translate as “What does this mean?” What does this mean for us as we wrap up this Advent season and tiptoe into the joy of Christ-Mass again?

What does it all mean? It means God keeps promises. We live in a world that does not keep promises, but God does keep promises! From Isaiah's

promise to the psalmist's cry, from Paul's proclamation to Joseph's obedience—God is faithful. The sign has been given. Emmanuel has come.

What does it all mean? It means that the world in its crudeness and vanity lies to us. It says that we are isolated individuals, competing for scarce resources against a dangerous Other. But our lessons today tell us something different. We are not alone. We will have everything we need in God's time. God is with us. God will help us, just as God has promised.

What does it all mean? It means God shows us the way. As I was preparing this sermon a few evenings ago, I was watching the news of a heavy fog descending on Houston. ABC13 had a time-lapse camera on downtown Houston, and we watched as the fog dropped over the city and the downtown disappeared.....We feel like that sometimes, don't we? Visibility is near zero. All you want is for the fog to lift — for the light to break through. That's Psalm 80 today. The people are in a fog of confusion, suffering and uncertainty. They cannot see what God is doing. They cannot see hope. So they pray, "Lord, lift the fog. Shine on us again." It is the honest cry of those who know they need God's help. Today we are reminded once again that God is with us. The sign arrives. The fog lifts. The promise becomes flesh.

What does it all mean? It means God chooses to be with us, not from a distance, but in flesh and blood. In our fears, our confusion, our longing, God comes to us. God does not abandon us. Christ is with us now; through the Holy Spirit; in this place; in our messes; in the Word; in, with and under the Holy Meal. Emmanuel.

What does it all mean? It means that Joseph, like John the Baptizer, points us to who Jesus is, what his pedigree is. He is Emmanuel — "God-with-us"! He is Jesus — "God saves"!

What does it all mean? It means Jesus saves. His name is his mission. He

enters our world not to condemn it, but to rescue it – to rescue us – from sin, fear, despair and death itself. He saves us from sin by forgiving us. He saves us from death by conquering it. He saves us from ourselves by giving us his Spirit.

What does it all mean? It means that we too are called to faithful obedience. It means saying “yes” to God even when we don’t fully understand what “yes” means.

What does it all mean? It means that Advent isn’t simply about preparing to celebrate a birth long ago. It means that, in God’s grace, Christ comes to us now, and it means that Christ is always coming – into our hearts, into our fears, into our waiting, into our world.

So, as we see the end of Advent and our Christ-Mass celebration ahead, we pray with the psalmist: “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.”

And God answers: “Do not be afraid. I am with you, just as I have promised. Emmanuel.”

Amen.

Pastor David A. Roschke  
Guest Preacher