

Advent 4a 2019
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
December 22, 2019
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Isaiah 7:10-17 Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18 Romans 1:1-7 Matthew 1:18-25

The light of Christ

We made it. You have made it through the longest night – and shortest day – of the year 2019. Our countdown to Jesus’ appearance in the manger is almost complete. Even now, in these preparatory days,

there are many signs of Christ among us. In the church, we often use light as a tangible sign of Christ. In the Easter vigil, the newly kindled Christ light is spread from a single flame and announced to the gathered body of Christ: (sing) “the light of Christ.” In just a few days we will light the white candle in the Advent wreath, the Christ candle, and celebrate that Jesus Christ, the light of the world, is born. In ancient days a starry light in the sky showed shepherds and kings the path to a light so powerful that darkness will never overcome it.

(sing) The light of Christ.

Eight centuries before the birth of Jesus, King Ahaz was in military trouble. The military forces of Judah could not overpower the brutal Assyrian forces. All shall be well, Isaiah told him; peace will soon rule the land. The Lord told Ahaz to ask for a sign, as low or as high as Ahaz needed, to know that God was present. For whatever reason, Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign. Quoting the book of Deuteronomy, Ahaz said that he would not “put God to the test.”

Isaiah the prophet told him that there would be a sign the a peaceable kingdom will come: a child will be born who is “God-with-us,” Emanuel. We remember that a prophet’s message **first** has meaning in the prophet’s own time. There was a male child to be born long before Christ who would be a sign of God among the Israelites during a terrible time.

A prophet’s message, however, is not a message only for a single point in time. The gospel writer Matthew, who knows ancient scripture, wants us to see the birth of Jesus as **the** fulfillment of Isaiah’s message from God. It is not just any birth, but in the birth of Jesus, that God’s promise to be with us is complete, made full - fulfilled. Many signs of God that we experience are ambiguous: the lush foliage of a tree in springtime is a sure sign of God’s creation and presence; and, we say, it is

simply photosynthesis. A natural disaster is a sign of God's vengeance and wrath or it is simply an event of nature. Our most complete, known experience of God is in the person of Jesus, born of a woman in Bethlehem. There is no greater sign, no more experiential sign of God-with-us than in this child. God wanted to be sure that we knew this child, this light in a darkened world.

And so the light comes to us out of the darkness, and along with God's growing light. In Mary's dark time by the standards of the world – she could have been stoned to death, Joseph followed the word of an angel and named her child God-with-us, Emanuel. The angel spoke another name, Jesus, Joshua, Yeshua, which means "save." This name of Jesus is a verb, so very soon we will meet a baby named "save!" The angel said to Joseph, "she [Mary] will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." God is actively saving us as we exist alongside God – with – us.

God has given us a savior who is not a far off or self-made golden deity, but one we encounter in the straw of a feed trough, robed in a bit of rough cloth. Jesus comes to us as a vulnerable infant, calling us to respond in love. Even a culture generally removed from stables and work animals can see the humility of such an entrance into the world. From Jesus' lowly beginning, perhaps we can begin to comprehend that we cannot sink lower than the reach of Jesus' love; nor can we raise ourselves to heights above his measure. God with us is here.

In the coming days, let light flood your being. Bear the light of Christ in all that you do. In gifts, visits, travel, cooking, gathering with friends – we show the world that the true light will always conquer the darkness. As we light a single candle, friends, know that: "a child will be born...." God be with you as we await our Savior's birth.

(sing) The light of Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus!