

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Isaiah 7:10-16

SERMON TITLE: Signs & Visions: Immanuel

These are anxious times. Our nation is at war. The events of 9/11 are still impacting our lives--especially the lives of our men and women in the armed forces and their families, and the lives of ordinary people in Iraq and Afghanistan. And yes, the possibility of another terrorist attack within our borders still exists.

Some people are anxious about the economy. Are we headed for a recession? How many more people will lose their homes to foreclosure? How high will energy prices go?

And you may have heard, there's a presidential campaign underway—and some folks are fearful of the outcome. In fact, I've heard people of both political parties say that if the candidate of the other party wins the presidency it may be time to leave the U. S. altogether.

And then, of course, there are the anxieties that arise more from our personal circumstances. There are folks in our midst this morning who are dealing with cancer and other illnesses. There are people grieving the loss of loved ones. Marriages are in trouble. Some folks are struggling with their finances. Some folks are dealing with the loss of their jobs or the potential loss of their jobs. There's anxiety in our congregation about the start of a new worship service and a capital campaign in the spring. On and on it goes. These are anxious times and even the beauty of this season does little to reduce the anxiety—in fact, for many people, this season of the year multiplies the anxiety exponentially.

Now have you noticed? When we're anxious it becomes extremely difficult to remain open and attentive to the spiritual side of things. We just so get wrapped up in our fears and in trying to save ourselves and in trying to control our out-of-control lives that we lose track of God. We stop looking for God. We stop listening for God. And when that happens, we're only left with ourselves, and with our fears, and all our anxious efforts to fix things.

But God is still around. God is with us. And there is a sign to remind us—and there is a name to remind us—Immanuel, which means God is with us—and there are signs all around us to remind us!

There was a sign for King Ahaz and the people of Judah. The kingdom was under attack from King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel. Ahaz was afraid. The people were anxious.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed the word of God to Ahaz: “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear—stand firm in faith. God promised that Judah’s enemies would be defeated—all Ahaz had to do was to trust God to save Judah, and to resist forging alliances with foreign nations.

God even commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign of God’s faithfulness, but Ahaz refused. God, however, insisted: *Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.* God promised that once the child reached the age to refuse evil and to choose good, the two enemies would no longer be a threat to Judah. The child was a reminder to the king and to the people in their anxiety and fear: *God is with us.*

But Ahaz ignored the sign. He was too fearful for faith and so he made his own way—he negotiated an alliance with the Assyrians that brought frightful consequences to his kingdom.

Some 734 years later, the fear and anxiety had not subsided. This time, God’s people were under the thumb of the Romans and a ruthless Jewish king—a Roman puppet—named Herod. But Matthew, the evangelist, proclaimed good news: There was a woman named Mary bearing a child from the Holy Spirit. And Matthew remembered the old words and he gave them new life. He interpreted the coming of Jesus with a quote from Isaiah using a Greek translation of the original Hebrew: *“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”*

Now for many at the time, there was no sign to be seen. Many were just like King Ahaz; they saw nothing special in the coming of this child named Jesus.

But for some, like Mary's fiancé Joseph, and for us who have received the good news by faith, the coming of Jesus, the one we call Immanuel, was and is a sign that God is with us now and always. We are not alone—left to our own devices. So what is there to fear?

And it's a strange thing, but once we've embraced the notion that God can be with us in a child—and in something like a cross—we begin to see signs of God's presence in the most unusual things.

For example, on Tuesday, May 8, 1984, Presbyterian pastor Benjamin Weir was kidnapped on the streets of Beirut, Lebanon by members of the Islamic Jihad. Rev. Weir was taken to a building outside of Beirut and placed alone in a bare, cold and dirty room. He was blindfolded and had his left arm chained and padlocked to a nearby radiator.

After waking up from a nap during those first terrible hours of captivity, Rev. Weir lifted up his blindfold and began examining his room.

He first noticed an electric wire hanging from the ceiling where a light fixture had once been. The wire ended in an arc with three wires exposed. To Rev. Weir, the wires looked like fingers. And then he imagined a hand and an arm reaching downward. He thought of Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel of God's hand and finger reaching down to create Adam. Weir says, "Here God was reaching toward me, reminding me, saying, 'You're alive. You are mine; I've made you and called you into being for a divine purpose.'" Weir says, "This insight startled me. It was a bolt of inspiration out of heaven."

From that point, Weir's imagination came alive to fill that desolate room with the signs of God's presence. Weir counted the horizontal slats of the French doors that were a part of his

prison room. “There were so many of them,” he said, “like a crowd.” And then the thought came to him: “a crowd of witnesses--a crowd of witnesses from past and present who have known God’s faithfulness in times of crisis and trial.”

Weir next noticed two white plastic covers for electrical connections on the wall near the ceiling. He said to himself, “What can they be for me?” And then he thought--”Ears. The ears of God that hear the groaning of the saints.”

He then saw a hook of reinforcing rod that had been bent out of the concrete form before pouring. It formed a closed ellipse. He asked himself, “What could elevated ellipse be for me? And then he thought, “An eye! The eye of God.” That steel eye caused Weir to remember that God’s wisdom and sovereignty are never thwarted.

As night fell on Ben Weir’s first day of captivity, this was his prayer: “Show me your gifts and enable me to recognize them as coming from you. Thank you for your encouraging presence. Praise be to you.” (quotes from Benjamin Weir’s book, Hostage Bound, Hostage Free, pp. 28-31.)

Isn’t it amazing what the eyes of faith can see? Once we take that leap of faith and see in the coming of a child named Jesus—the one we call Immanuel, God with us—our view of the world changes—and we’re able to see signs of God’s sustaining presence all around us in the most unusual things even in the most terrifying of circumstances.

Come to think of it, I see Immanuel in you. You are a sign to me that God is with us. So I ask you, in these anxious times when the world seems to shake as the trees of the forest before the wind, what is there for us to fear? A sign is given: Immanuel, God is with us. Thanks be to God!