



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 4 (A)
December 22, 2019

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

Isaiah 7: 10-16

I grew up in a family that didn't believe in making multiple trips when transporting things. We learned young that you could weave six or seven grocery bags like bangles on your wrists; yes, you waddled and struggled to fit through the doorway, but there was also a sense of pride that, like a seasoned ironman, you got all the groceries in one trip by yourself. In college, I lived on the third floor. One day, I was carrying an armchair, a 25 lb. bag of dog food, three textbooks, and under my chin, my mail. As I climbed the stairs, a neighbor stopped me to ask if I needed help. I returned their kind offer with a snarky expression. Of course I don't need help, I can do it on my own – in one trip.

In today's passage in Isaiah, I can't help but think that King Ahaz is probably the type of guy that gets everything out of his chariot in one trip. We find King Ahaz in the eighth century B.C. Syria and Israel have an alliance against Judah and Judah's King, Ahaz, is scared. He is stubborn and refuses to turn to God for protection, instead trying to make alliances with Assyria, which – spoiler alert! – ends very badly for them.

King Ahaz is carrying a heavy load of a kingdom in conflict and grasping desperately to hang onto control. The Lord spoke to Ahaz and actually invited him to test him for a sign. Ahaz is presented not only with the promise of divine help, but a divine test drive to prove the Lord's trustworthiness. King Ahaz turns down the offer. He has already made up his mind, and right or wrong, he has committed himself to it – like a fool on a staircase carrying way more than they could handle, refusing help and waiting for a disaster.

- King Ahaz had more faith in himself and his crafty plans than in God. It's easy to judge him, but we all have areas of our lives where we trust our plans more than God's promises. Where is it the hardest to let go and trust in God? Kids? Marriage? Finances? Health?
- We see in this text that sometimes we don't want a real savior; we want a savior on our own terms. Do you see that played out in your daily life?

Psalm 80: 5-10

There is a beautiful intertwining of words of lament and praise found in Psalm 80. The three sections of the psalm are punctuated with the refrain: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved" (vv. 3, 7, and 18).

The three sections can be defined as a cry to God for salvation (vv. 1-3), a description of the plight of the Northern kingdom (vv. 4-7), and images of Israel as a vine planted by God (v. 8-18). It is clear that this psalm is a desperate cry in response to the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

This psalm gives us an all-too-familiar story of people falling away from the salvation of God, relying on humans rather than the divine. The plea to God to save is heart-wrenching. The agony of these words and the hope of returning to the safety of God's promises is something we dwell on in this penitential season of Advent. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we pray that our ears and hearts would be open to hearing these scriptures – the promise of Isaiah, the hope of the psalmist and the word of fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

- The psalmist prays, remembering God's mighty acts of deliverance, but seems to wonder where those acts are in their time of need. Have you ever found yourself in a season of life where you felt like the psalmist?
- For a lot of people, the holidays are a hard season because of personal loss and grief. How can we recognize and walk alongside others who are in a season of lament?

Romans 1:10-16

Paul does much in such a short text. His offering of the concept of calling is not to be missed. Paul tells these Christians that he has been "called" to be an apostle and that they are "called" to belong to Christ and be holy (vv. 6-7). There is a double call between Paul and his audience that bookmarks this text.

From this text, we can see that the key to discovering our call isn't finding something we are good at or something that thrills us, but instead, is knowing the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit for holy living. The call to holy living is a call to offer oneself up and love others in humility, just as Christ did. The fourth candle of the Advent wreath represents love. Jesus showed his love for us in his life and death. Just like the Romans to whom Paul wrote, we are called to Christ and to holy living.

- What would life look like if we all took our call to love as seriously as we take other vocations?
- What does this text tell us about our responsibility to the gospel?

Matthew 1: 18-25

We begin with the genesis of Jesus in this gospel. We read this scene as an Advent text, but Matthew tells us here that it is Jesus' birth narrative. It ends up working, because Matthew isn't focused on the birth itself, but rather the identity of the one being born. Matthew's focus is Christological.

Another unique feature of Matthew's text is his focus on the role of Joseph. In Luke's gospel, the focus is on Mary as the active parent and the one in dialogue with the angel of the Lord; in Matthew, we get a glimpse of Joseph's side of the story. Matthew emphasizes the faithfulness of Joseph in the role of Jesus' birth and presents him as a righteous man.

Matthew tells of Joseph's journey as he finds out Mary is pregnant and tries to dismiss her quietly. Matthew records the angel of the Lord visiting Joseph to reveal the divine predicament in which they found themselves. Matthew's gospel gives us a rare glimpse into the life and faithfulness of Joseph as he, in faith, takes Mary as his wife and serves Jesus as his earthly father and even accepts responsibility for naming him according to God's command. We don't see or know much of this man from the gospels. This week, it is worth slowing down and really paying attention to how Matthew portrays Joseph and what we can learn from him about faithfulness and obedience.

- What do you think it was like for Joseph raising Jesus, knowing that he was not his biological child?
- Why do you think Joseph is overlooked in scripture? From what we read in Matthew, what can we learn from him?

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