

"Love is a Flame"

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Reading: Isaiah 7.10-16

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. Then Isaiah* said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 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.

Matthew 1.18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph; being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he 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.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

Christmas is a great time of year for those of us who harbour a secret streak of pyromania. Lots of candles. Fireplaces and yule logs. Sometimes those little outdoor luminaries set in the snow. You can mess with matches to your heart's content. And a flame is endlessly fascinating. The flicker of it and the shadow it casts. The way the colour changes. Sometimes the sharp odour. And the underlying tension – is this going to warm us or burn us? Will it keep us cozy or are we perhaps in a bit of danger? After the Carols in a Minor Key service on Wednesday, Nenke remarked on the light and heat generated by the candles we had lighted. Each candle had been lit by a participant in honour of a person remembered, or of a heartfelt hope or dream. They were ablaze as signs of love. And lighted together that way, they made a wonderful sign of our gathered love, and of the power of sharing in that quiet time. Even one candle can light a room, but the sight of them burning together brought cheer and solace.

But now the quiet is past! Christmas Sunday already, the last Sunday of Advent, countdown to the holy night itself. Lots of preparations both at church and at home, as the clock ticks. A wonderful all ages service last week, the quiet carols on Wednesday, a noisy newcomers' party last night, still getting readers and servers lined up for Christmas Eve, and the choir practicing madly.

On the home front, almost everyone I know tries to pack in too much. Here's a perfect example: a good friend of mine in Ottawa happens to hate decorating a Christmas tree. She just doesn't like it. So, does she skip it? No. Does she get herself a fake one that can just be popped into place every year, with little fuss? No. Does she get her kids to put up the tree for her while she is out of the house? No. She invites all her friends and cooks them a meal, and bakes chocolate shortbread, and gets *them* to trim the tree! A great solution, but it illustrates the general rule that Christmas just naturally gets out of hand. Concerts and shopping trips, special baking and visiting, send donations, write a letter about the year, maybe a special TV show we want to watch. With DVDs and on demand, you can probably just watch when you want – but

when will that be? I have certain books that I bring out to read at Christmas. What can I say?

As we enter the last lap, it all seems to accelerate into a blur. But don't you find that time itself seems to become a little unreliable as we get closer to Christmas. Sometimes it seems to be speeding along hectically but then it falters to a halt. We suddenly remember another time, another person. We pause as we listen to the radio and consider the lives of strangers on the other side of the world. We have one of those odd time-stopping encounters in the middle of a busy street or store.

And here, on this dark December morning, as crumbs of snow drift down, we stop. We stop and listen to ancient tales from scripture, astonishing stories from a place and time very remote from us. The readings and themes for Christmas Sunday are so rich and plentiful that they seem like wrapped boxes under the tree. Beautiful to behold, but you know that once you begin to open them, there will be chaos.

A virgin shall conceive. Try opening that one! Marie says, I just hang that one on the sky-hook. Not really gone, just not in play.

Or Ahaz and his geopolitical worries – his neighbours allied against him, hostile empires burgeoning, and his court prophet Isaiah says, don't worry, God says you will be alright. Ask for a sign. Well. We listen to that passage simply because Matthew refers to it later, but perhaps we can identify with poor beleaguered Ahaz when he says to Isaiah, I don't want a sign! Life is complicated enough without a sign from God.

And that sign when it comes, that baby – is it Hezekiah or Jesus? Or somehow both?

And then Joseph too. How incongruously the text of the Gospel of Matthew juxtaposes the cosmic and the mundane! A royal line descended through 42 generations, angel messengers and portentous dreams, an ancient text interpreted to prophesy the arrival of the Messiah. And then in the next chapter we will see scholars and kings studying the old manuscripts, as they pore over maps and search the night sky for a star. Yet in the middle of that majestic story, we hear something very

domestic, something quite private really – we get a glimpse of Joseph’s anxiety about the awkward situation. His desire to do the right thing. Was it simple conventionality or hurt feelings that motivated him? Did Joseph love Mary? The mystery of their relationship gives us songs and fables to this day.

We imagine Matthew the gospel-writer sitting at a desk with ivory stylus in hand, or a bamboo reed-pen. He has a copy of the Gospel of Mark, a copy of another gospel now lost, and his memory full of stories that people told about Jesus. We have to assume he chose carefully as he pieced together the story he wanted to tell, intending that his listeners and readers would receive something particular. He wanted to tell them that God had come to dwell with humanity. He was writing to give them a sign. He was sending a sign to all the succeeding generations of Christians and seekers. Sending a sign to us.

Centuries later we are still enthralled by the story of a wondrous birth. We still look for the signs that God is with us, Immanuel. But the signs that we find at Christmas are not grand miracles. They are like those candles the other night, lighted for love.

The warmth of the love we receive at this season is the sign.

The brightness of the love that we give is the sign.

The cheer of the love that we observe is the sign.

Love is warm and bright and cheerful.

And just a bit dangerous. For love is a flame.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.