

**“Emmanuel God-with-us” a sermon preached by Jordan Redding at Knox Church
Dunedin New Zealand on 22 December 2019**

I.

Every year we gather at Christmas time to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Every year we proclaim the hope of God-with-us, Emmanuel. And every year we proclaim this hope stubbornly and defiantly in the midst of whatever is going on in our world, whatever is going on in our community, or in our personal lives. In the midst of the good, the bad, and the ugly. God-is-with-us.

The last couple of weeks, the headlines have been dominated by a large dose of the bad and no small measure of the ugly. In New Zealand, we think of the tragedy of Whakaari White Island and the ongoing search for bodies. We think of the U.S. and the presidential impeachment proceedings. In the U.K., we think of the messy and divisive election that offers few answers for the seemingly never-ending Brexit saga. In Australia, raging bushfires and record temperatures caused by a fierce heat wave. And while that happens in Australia, climate negotiations conclude underwhelmingly in Madrid, with many saying the talks failed to achieve what they needed to. What does it mean to proclaim the hope that God-is-with-us even in these situations?

I was reminded of Greta Thunberg’s speech from earlier this year, in which she said, “I don’t want your hope, I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic like the house is on fire. Because it is.” Her words capture something of the Zeitgeist. And she has a point. The global environmental challenge facing humankind is of a scale never seen before and will require complex answers and international cooperation that seems at times impossible. She is quite right that we can’t solve these issues with a “she’ll be right” attitude and wishful thinking. “I don’t want your hope!” she says. And if hope is a kind of blind optimism that denies reality, then we’d probably want to agree with her.

But all of this leaves us feeling quite hope-less. It seems to me that today it’s precisely hope that the world is lacking! We are suffering from chronic despair that takes the form of indifference and apathy. We become desensitised. The issues facing our world today are bigger than any one person or any one nation can solve. They seem entirely out of our control. And so the easy thing to do is to stick our heads in the sand and pretend like nothing’s happening.

II.

In our reading today from Isaiah, we find King Ahaz in a similar mindset. He is overwhelmed by the threat of imminent invasion from two separate foreign powers: the kingdom of Aram and the kingdom of Ephraim. And Aram and Ephraim had formed an alliance to invade Judah and take the city of Jerusalem. And Ahaz is terrified. Paralysed by fear. Overwhelmed by what appears to be a hopeless situation.

This is something most of us have probably experienced at some point ... maybe not being king or queen of a nation ... but being in a situation that seems totally overwhelming and beyond your control and it begins to become all-encompassing -- at least, this is what happens for me -- it bounces around in your head until you lose all perspective.

This is where our reading picks up. The prophet Isaiah goes to visit the King in his despair. And Isaiah offers some pastoral care. The first thing he does is he invites Ahaz to pray. Ask for a sign from God. Let God remind you that, though circumstances are grim, though you can't see your way out of this, you are not alone, God is with you, you have not been abandoned, life will carry on. Isaiah invites Ahaz to attend to God.

And even though Ahaz in his despair is unable to even ask God for a sign, God provides a sign anyway. We've all heard the prophecy because it was later applied to Jesus:

"A young woman will give birth to a son and name him Emmanuel, God-with-us."

And the thing is, things don't really get better for Judah. The geo-political tensions in the region don't settle. We're told that over the course of the child's life, the politicking and warmongering will rage on. Aram and Ephraim will be destroyed. But they'll be replaced by an even bigger power, the Assyrian Empire. Things won't ease up for Judah. And yet hope persists in spite of all this, as God reminds the people whose they are, guiding the people through uncertainty, keeping them grounded in reality. God-is-with-us.

III.

I think today it can be even harder to see the signs of God among us. We've become so desensitised, so distracted, so busy. We've kind of taught ourselves not to notice. In the age of the internet and smart technology, we're never switched off. We are

surrounded 24/7 by sensationalist news headlines, social-media notifications, emails, advertisements. We are super-saturated by as much information as we can handle. It compounds and accumulates until we reach our capacity and spills over in banal apathy. The irony of technology is that the more it connects us, the more disconnected we become from reality.

I certainly don't want to demonise technology. I think it provides enormous benefits as well for which I'm thankful every day. But it is having a massive effect on how we engage with reality. Every morning, for example, I begin my day by opening the news app on my phone and scrolling through the news headlines. And then when I'm suitably depressed and apathetic at the world, I open my laptop, check my to-do list and my emails. And then I get to work. It sets the tone of my day. Is it any wonder that people suffer today from indifference and apathy when this is the air we breathe?

This week I had the privilege of participating in the week-long Advent prayer rhythm, which Knox do every year with Holy Name and All Saints. It consists of committing to a private time of prayer every day over the course of a week, and then later in the day meeting with a small group to share what you experienced or where you noticed God in your day. The small group provides good motivation for actually committing to the prayer time (which is so easy to squeeze out otherwise). It meant that my day began, not by flicking through news headlines and not by looking at my to-do-list for the day, but simply by pausing to attend to God. To ground myself. To bring my head out of the cloud and attend to reality. To quieten my own thoughts I read Psalm 80 and then sat in silence. But it was transformative. It was like everything was set in a different key. Reality was the same. The same news headlines. The same to-do list. The same emails to answer. But my usual apathetic, sleepy rhythm had been disrupted. It was like I'd woken up, like Joseph from his dream.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about beginning the day in this way. "The beginning of the day," he says, "should not be burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day's work. At the threshold of the new day stands the Lord who made it ... Therefore at the beginning of the day let all distraction and empty talk be silenced and let the first thought and the first word belong to God to whom our whole life belongs."

IV.

I think Bonhoeffer is spot on. Prayer serves to ground us in a different reality, to orient us to God's presence. And so we're called to be a people of prayer. And so we're called to gather in worship week after week after week. And so we're called to proclaim the promise to one another. To remind ourselves. To ground ourselves. We do so because, like Ahaz, it is so easy to be overwhelmed by despair and apathy. We do so for our sake and for the world's sake. We do so for the sake of Christ, the hope of the world, who is making all things new.

In the age of Trump, Brexit, and climate change, our task is all the more urgent. Like Isaiah to Ahaz, we are to speak hope to another. We are to be hope for one another. Because hope begins small. Hope begins with a child in a manger. Today we celebrate baptism, which is a sign of hope, a seal of God-with-us. We baptise Katie into the death and risen life of Jesus. We baptise her into a community that follows Jesus on his way of suffering love. Through our shared baptism into Christ, we become present to one another in love and oriented in hope to the way the world could be.

All that goes on in the world will continue to go on. All the global challenges facing us today. One megalomaniac will replace the next. One empire will replace the other. One war will give birth to the next war. And we are called to continue to engage with this reality. But hope does not begin there. And our first thought and first word will not be determined by these things. It will be determined by a different reality -- the reality of the One into whose life we're baptized: Jesus Christ, God-with-us, Emmanuel. Amen.

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