

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Reflection for the Journey to the Manger, December 6, 2009
Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

MUCH MORE THAN A PROOF TEXT

Wow, that reading from Isaiah proves Jesus to be the Messiah! [Affirmative responses from the ecumenical congregation] You say, “Yes” and “Amen” because you believe, but for the skeptical, the answer is actually “No,” it does not *prove* anything, except that someone in ancient Judah wanted the people to believe God would raise up from the failing line of King David a new leader far better than the current sorry lot.

So, do we toss the reading aside, or keep it around as a traditional Christmas ornament? Neither. We listen for the word of God to a world raging with anger even as it sinks into a depression of the spirit that threatens us with despair. If prosperity and carefree shopping are the measure of life, this is not a promising Christmas season. There are a lot of people out there and probably in here as well who are hurting.

Isaiah speaks God’s promise to people stumbling in darkness. Their stability is collapsing, their plans failing, and their dreams evaporating. But God has not given up on them, and the prophet speaks into the gloom a promise no darkness can extinguish. A child is born for us. Surely it is for our children that we need to find faith’s courage to stand up go forward. But this is not just another birth. The kings have been shameful, the people wayward, and the self-proclaimed prophets a bunch of pious liars with their hands out for money. But the future belongs to God, and Isaiah concludes this prophecy with the one factor that overrides all others: “the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” God is passionate about loving this world and will not quit or back off.

The Creator loves the creation. In steadfast love, God has chosen willingly to commit to the creatures of flesh and blood, and the embodiment of that love became flesh and lived among us as one of us, forever. And his way was compassion, not threats or guilt trips. Not only in his baby body in the manger but fully in his torn and dying body on the cross, Jesus embodies both God to us and us to God.

It’s not about proving anything. It’s about a love that would rather suffer, be shamed, and die than give up on us and let us go our own way to destruction. And because God refuses to give up on us, we must not give up on God, ourselves, or each other. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not smother it. Advent is the promise that God’s redemptive love will win, and the victory will be that of redemptive love, not fear or despair. For to us the child was born; for us the Son was given. Amen.