“God with Us”
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25
4th Sunday of Advent

A Sermon Delivered
By
Chaplain Carey H. Cash
United States Naval Academy Chapel
22 December 2013

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our
hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

At the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, Judah and in fact all of Israel was in sharp decline, and had been for
300 years. It had been 300 years since the reign of righteous King David during which Israel was a light to the
nations and the people prospered under the aegis of God’s blessing. But in time, as is often the case, weak
kings came to power and began to vacillate between obedience and idolatry. The result was that Israel became
divided and new threats began to emerge. And it was said that the people “trembled like trees shaken by the
wind.” By the 8th century B.C., Israel, a land to which nations had once streamed for guidance and wisdom,
was a hollow shell of the past.

Surprisingly though, temples, or we might say, churches, were full. Attendance was high. People were
in worship. But it was largely ritualistic and pro forma. People were distracted and self-absorbed. They were
bringing sacrifices to God but denying the weightier provisions of the law - not taking care of the most innocent
among them, not carrying for the fatherless and the widows, not raising their children to fear the Lord. And
perhaps the worst thing about this age is that no one was making the connection between their dysfunction and
the sin that was causing it. Coming to power at an early age was King Ahaz. He was caught in the dilemma of
what to do for his people, where to look for answers, how to proceed.

In the middle of all this, Isaiah the prophet sees a sign, an answer - something that will come and finally
bring peace, purpose, and healing to God’s people; something greater, for which people can live, that will
finally bring healing to their land. And what’s this answer that’s coming on the wings of such great hope?
What does Isaiah see? “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will
give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

The answer was a child.
It’s probably not what King Ahaz or the people of Judah expected to hear…that the answer would be a child. A great political leader? Now that would be an answer. A conquering general? Perhaps. A revolutionary? That would make sense. But a child? On the other hand, if Ahaz had really thought about it…if he’d just taken a moment and recalled his own history and the history of his nation, he would’ve recalled how often in story of salvation, the giving of a child has been the answer. When God calls Abram to be the father of a nation, it’s through a child, Isaac, that he begins this work. When Israel cries out for deliverance from slavery, God sends a child, Moses, born of a Hebrew, drawn from the river. When God’s people find themselves oppressed by the Philistines, God sends a child, Sampson, set apart from birth to grow strong and mighty. When Hannah cries out in her barrenness, God gives her little Samuel, who will go on to be the prophet of Israel and befriend a mighty King. To David and Bathsheba are given the boy, Solomon, who will build the temple and make Israel great among the nations.

And even beyond the times of Ahaz, this pattern still holds. When Israel needs a voice in the time of destruction and exile, God gives the boy, Jeremiah, to speak the word of the Lord. When a woman named Elizabeth prays to God to bless her and her people, God sends her a child, John the Baptist, who leapt for joy in his mother’s womb as he was filled with the Holy Spirit. And when the fullness of time had come, when humanity was crushed under the weight of its sin and could endure no more, God touched the womb of a young pure faithful Jewish girl named Mary, and gave us a Child… “And the virgin will give birth to a son and they will call him, Immanuel which means God with us.” (Matthew 1:23)

A Child has always been the answer

I suppose the sad irony to all this is that children these days are generally not seen as answers or blessings, but burdens, liabilities, something to be avoided at all costs. A recent Time Magazine cover story on the childless couple has stirred up a great deal of controversy and debate over the last few months. The cover story appeared in August of this year, and was entitled, The Childfree Life: When having it all means not having Children. The photo on the front of the magazine really sums up the argument. It shows a couple somewhere in their 20s or 30s, lying on the beach together, fit and smiling, content and gazing up at the camera as they relish the peace and quiet of an afternoon on the beach; and of course there’s not a single child anywhere in sight. The article presents the facts that fewer Americans are having children – fewer even than the years of the Great Depression - but it really goes on to make a moral argument that choosing the childfree life is legitimate; that it’s even praiseworthy for couples to remain childless – to “have it all” as the article claims. “Having it all”
in this sense describes this life of having everything one could want, unencumbered by the demands and responsibilities of raising and caring for children.

It didn’t always use to be this way. In fact, it’s interesting how cultures and civilizations have waxed and waned in the way they’ve viewed children. Ahaz lived in a culture that dismissed the blessing that children were, even rejected them; and perhaps that’s why he goes on to dismiss Isaiah’s prophecy. But it hasn’t always been like this. There was a time when children were thought of as tremendous blessings! Listen to how the Bible speaks of children:

- They’re like olive plants around your table.
- Arrows in a man’s quiver.
- Crowns for the aged.
- An inheritance from the Lord.
- Rewards for faithfulness.
- Jesus said, “Suffer the children and forbid them not to come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
- He set a child in their midst saying, “Unless you become like one of these you will in no wise inherit the kingdom of God.”
- He told us that it would be “from the lips of children and infants that praise would come.”

Even in our own culture, there was a time in the recent past that, with a child, it was believed, came great blessing and bounty and security to one’s life and legacy.

We’ve come a long way from that vision. I was struck by the reasons couples gave as noted in the Time Magazine article for not wanting to have children:

- Kids…I don’t want kids.
- I never really desired to have children.
- It’s not my thing.
- Kids make too much noise.
- I never really played with dolls.
- Kids are a distraction from my career.
- They cost too much.
- One person said, “My plans, professionally, daily, long-term, even just for a vacation, are free from all the contingencies that come with children.”
- “Zip-lining, canoeing, monthly dinners at the foodie groups – we can do anything we want. Why wouldn’t we want to live this way?”
- One couple said, “If we had children we’d have to grieve the life we currently have.”
- And to sum it up, one lady said “I just knew I couldn’t trade my freedom for a child.”

When I read this article, I grieved. I thought of Jesus’ words that out of “the abundance of the heart the mouth truly does speak.” (Luke 6:45) Think about the vocabulary with which we speak about even the prospect of having children today. We talk about pregnancy as a “risk” or an “unwanted condition.” We say we don’t want the “burden” of a child to complicate things. We’re counseled to “take precautions” and “be safe” when it comes to sex, as if the prospect of a child would be unsafe or harmful to us. Comedian Margaret Cho said, “Babies just scare me!” To many people, a child is an annoyance at best, an interruption to one’s personal pursuits, a consequence or a punishment. Kids change things – they do. They re-arrange our priorities, upend our schedules and plans, they’re messy. And so we’ve come to a point where we have a whole generation of adults now taking extreme measures to protect themselves from children. It’s as if kids are a danger to our lives; they’re the new “Boogie Man.”

During my Sophomore year at the Citadel I was flying home for Christmas break, and while I was in the Charlotte airport waiting for my next flight, I saw something that I’d undoubtedly seen a thousand times before, but this time for some reason it presented itself to me in a completely different light. And it had to do with this very issue. There I was a 19-year old college kid with only myself to look after, and rightly so. After all I was single and so my life surrounded my own plans, my desires, my own decisions, my issues. As I sat there, I looked over and saw a man, perhaps in his mid-30s, holding his daughter. He’d clearly had a long flight because he was a mess. He was wearing a tie, but it was sort of pulled to one side, his shirt was un-tucked in the back, hair messed up and he was exhausted. In his arms was his sleeping daughter, no more than 3 or 4 years old, completely at peace. As I looked at this disheveled man, I cannot explain what came over me, except that God in his grace spoke. Because as I looked at this man with that little girl, my only thought was, “I want that.” “I want all of it…the messed up hair, un-tucked shirt, and yes a sweet child in my arms.” I remember the moment because the thought was so foreign that it surprised me. I was only 19.

You see as disheveled as he was, what I saw in the midst of all the mess, was purpose. This man was living for something greater than himself. He was tired and exhausted, but it didn’t matter. There was purpose
and perspective and legacy, a sense of contribution, the reward of giving oneself. It was an image of a man living for greater things, for eternal things. His life had been caught up in blessing another. He wasn’t glued to his facebook page, or taking selfies or texting, or zip-lining free of distraction. No he was poured out in love and nurture and sacrifice.

Now, I need to say, this is not a sermon about having kids. It’s not. Some of you are thinking that. No, this is really about something much bigger than that. It’s about the One Child that God has given to all of us. Of all the means by which God could have redeemed this world, he chose to give us a Child - Jesus. And there’s a reason for that.

*This Holy Child was sent to re-arrange our priorities.* Isn’t that what children do? Whether you have kids or not, we’ve all cared for kids at one time or another. We know how it goes. If there’s a crying baby in the room, someone’s got to take care of that baby. How many times do we hear a baby and we think, “Will someone please take care of that baby?” Half the time it’s probably mine. 😊 Babies are demanding. They have to be. They demand our care and attention. They require sleepless nights, changing schedules, sacrifice. They pull at our shirts and mess up our hair. They cause us to change our priorities. They’re a mess! When this Child Jesus comes into our lives, he brings changes. He demands our attention. He requires us to be present and attentive, to stay up nights in prayer, to change our schedules, to re-arrange our lives, to put him first above all else.

*This Child was sent to give us a greater purpose for living.* Children do that too. Kids come into our lives and plans change. Suddenly, we begin thinking less about our own bucket lists, and more about the home we’re building, the kind of values we want to impart. We let trivial pursuits take second place, and begin thinking about how we can best provide for our kids, how we can bless them. This Child Jesus comes into our lives and the same thing happens. We begin to see our life differently. We remember Paul’s words that “when I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things.” (1 Corinthians 13:11) And we begin thinking about Jesus’ plans for our lives, greater plans. And His purposes become the dominating principle. “For he knows the plans he has for us, plans not to harm us but to prosper us to give us a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

*This Child, Jesus was sent to give us a greater capacity to love.* Kids certainly teach us that. How many times do Moms get to their dinner late and it’s cold because they’ve been taking care of everyone else, making sure all the little ones get fed? How many times in the middle of the night do parents let the other
one sleep while they rock the baby and then turn around and go to work in the morning? O how great a capacity children bring to us to sacrifice and love and keep loving! And in the midst of it all we find we’re giving more than we ever thought we could. We’re becoming different people. When this child Jesus comes into our lives, he changes us. He teaches us how to love, to give of ourselves, to go the extra mile. For this baby didn’t stay a baby, but became a Man. And this Man gave his life for the world. And when we welcome Him into our lives, that love - that greater love that gave everything on the cross - begins to widen our hearts and lift us up and teach us to love and he loved us - to sacrifice for others. And our lives are never the same.

So…Merry Christmas, let me be the first to congratulate you. **You’ve got a Baby! And his name is Jesus.** Let this Child change your priorities, let him upend your plans and rearrange your life. Let him give you greater purposes. Let him teach you how to love and sacrifice for others. Don’t dismiss him. But receive him. Welcome him. Embrace him. Hold him. For if you have him, “you have it all.”

“For unto you, in the city of David a Savior has been born; he is Christ the Lord.”

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift, Jesus.

Amen.