

Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

December 21, 2025

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 7: 10-16

Responsive Reading: Psalm 80: 1-8, 17-19

Epistle Reading: Romans 1: 1-7

Gospel Reading Matthew 1: 18-25

Sermon: Do Not Be Afraid

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary: The Lord Himself will give you a sign.

Our Advent candle for this fourth Sunday of Advent is LOVE.

Love came down at Christmas. Love, a lovely love divine. Love was born at Christmas. Stars and angels gave the sign.

The title for this week's message is, Be Not Afraid, taken from our Gospel, and the summary is, The Lord Himself will give you a sign, from Isaiah.

In our Gospel we find Joseph realizing that his betrothed is pregnant and he knows he didn't do it. In our society today this

could well be a show stopper. Seldom will a man marry a girl who has already proved her inability to be faithful, but in that day and age, it was much, much more serious. If Mary were pregnant by someone other than Joseph, she could be stoned; and if Joseph was the father, he would be forever ostracized.

Joseph was reportedly a kind and noble man, who would not want anyone stoned on his account. But on the other hand, why should he be ostracized for something he did not do? He decided to quietly pretend that he and Mary were never engaged, and therefore it would not be adultery.

Oops, God had a different answer. God's answer was to come to Joseph in a dream and tell him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."

Zap! Joseph wakes up in a cold sweat. "Whoa! God, if that is really You, how could that happen? And if it is true, who will ever believe it? I mean, it is just a dream, right? Should I put my whole future in the toilet just because of a dream? But on the other hand, if that is really You, God, how can I defy You without being damned? Man, God, You got me between a rock and a hard place, But on the other hand, I know her just enough to know that I do love her, and I would not want her stoned; and I have always loved and trusted You, so, oh well here goes. You got me God. Bring it on!"

That, my dear friends, is what LOVE is all about!

This experience of being put on the spot and challenged as to where we will stand on something that really matters is not unique to Joseph. We all have to make hard choices that have definite consequences. I have a son-in-law who lost two jobs because he refused to lie under oath for the companies that he worked for.

“I believe, help me in my unbelief.” This is a quote from Mark 9:24 after a distraught father asked Jesus to heal his son and Jesus asked him if he believed. We too, often cry out to God with this same concern. With me, it was the twenty third time my late wife Wanda dislocated her artificial hip. I loaded up some supplies for her and took off a few minutes after the ambulance. I cried out to God, “I believe in You, God, but I am hurting! Please, I need a sign to show me You are aware of my distress. This was in April, and as I headed north on Rt 63, I went under the train bridge coming into Batavia. As I came out from under the bridge, I saw the most beautiful Christmas lights on the trees next to the road. I thanked God for the outdated Christmas lights, only to realize there were no lights on the trees. What I was seeing was the reflected light from a Mausoleum shining through the ice crystals on the tree branches. I cried like a baby, and I still do every time I think of how God did something for me that He did not have to do.

We all look for a sign, and then sometimes when we get it, we do not believe it. Isaiah said, “Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” This is a pretty specific sign, but we doubters question it. It says a virgin will bear a child. It says the sex of the child will be a male. It even says what name of the child will be. Oh, but it does not give the year, month and day of the birth, and how could God cause a virgin birth?

Hello! God is God, and we have the book to prove it. This Bible is not a story book! It is not a fairy tale! This is a history book, confirmed by thousands of witnesses who wrote or told exactly what happened to the best of their ability.

Last week our Gospel lesson had John the Baptist wondering if Jesus was truly the Christ, or should he look for another. John the Baptist, like all of the Jews of that time period, thought the Messiah would be a mighty military leader who would overthrow the Romans and establish Israel as the supreme power of the world.

As babes in Christianity, we are expected to question the legitimacy of the Bible, but as we grow in our faith, we should be able to see how so much of the Bible is proved to be accurate, and thereby give credibility to the rest of it. We

should also be able to realize that our concepts and God's are often very different. Isaiah 55: 8-9 declares, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts".

We think that tragedies and death are always bad, but if a six-year-old boy had not been killed in a farm accident, then his parents would not have decided to have another child. Even though his mother was 43, his parents wanted someone in the family who was not part of that tragedy. And, if later in this child's life, he did not have a crippling motorcycle accident that kept this volunteer-obsessed young man out of Viet Nam, I never would have lived long enough to be your minister. God had a plan, even if it did not seem right at first.

Why do we think God could not cause a virgin birth? Why do we think that the Creator of the universe could not part the Red Sea? Why do we think that God could not know the hairs on our heads, or when a sparrow falls, or when a mosquito gets swatted? In God's world, these are all good things and part of His plan. As we grow closer to God, we start to realize that "With God all things are possible."

1st Corinthians 13, The love passage ends this way: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, understood as a child, I thought as a

child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know, just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Do not be afraid, for the Lord Himself will give you a sign. He will give you a virgin, and He will give you a history book so you too can know Him and believe on Him.

Hallelujah and Amen!