Focus (what u want the sermon to say): Just like Ahaz and Joseph, we have a choice to trust in God-with-us.

Function (what you want the sermon to do): That we would be reassured to trust in God’s plan and be released into joy.

-we speed up the lectionary texts for Winterfest

-this should be the week just before Christmas

-With that (and Xmas on a Sunday) we get to birth of Jesus earlier than some years

But before we get to that story, we are going to back up about 700 years to Isaiah.

-the prophet who is quote by Matthew (1:23)

-Matthew is Jewish person writing to other Jewish people who know their history/ story of their people

-the context and history have been lost in the subsequent years, so I begin with Is.

In Is. 7 -we find King Ahaz -the ruler of Judah.

Quick summary:

* two neighboring countries (northern kingdom of Israel, and Syria) have joined forces and are trying to take over Judah.
* They want to take Ahaz’s throne away.
* Of course, King Ahaz is frightened by this.
* Those two kingdoms were forming an alliance to resist the neighborhood "super-power," Assyria.
* But Ahaz plan: to buddy up to Assyria in order to get their protection from the other 2; (take the biggest bully on the block a plate of cookies so he'll protect you from the smaller bullies.)
* But God wanted to give Ahaz an even more certain promise of protection.
* God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign, but Ahaz already has his own protection plan and resorts to a kind of false piety ("I will not put God to the test"),
* God still gives him a sign. (like when I ask “would you set the table?” -it’s not really a Q)

And the sign that God gives him, the sign that will confirm God's protection, will be a child.

In Hebrew, a young woman, will have a baby, and call that baby Immanuel, “God with us”. (We don't know if this young woman was a member of Ahaz's household or Isaiah’s, but either way, Ahaz would know about it.)

You see the baby's name was a confirmation that God was with his people and would not abandon them to these two kings.

In fact, by the time that little Immanuel was eating solid food, and was learning right from wrong, by that time, Israel and Syria would both be in ruin...deserted.

But, as the prophet tells us, Assyria was still coming and Judah would have to deal with them.

Now, the question I had was this: why would this strange, little-known incident from Middle East in the 8th century BC, be part of our Christmas narrative?

(?word Emmanuel?)

-If you take just a little step back from this story -Is. 7-12 theme is a bunch of children born with names that are in and of themselves messages from God.

So when Matthew, 700 years later, tells the story of Jesus’ birth, he is reminding his audience of all the many prophecies of old about a coming baby who will change the whole world:

*Angel says “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken to Isaiah “Behold, a maiden shall conceive and bear a son, + they shall call him Immanuel.*

There is double fulfillment in Isaiah’s words.

Remember, Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience, who already believe that Jesus is the Messiah. He is not trying to convince them of that, but describe how well Jesus embodies Messiahship, and how much he is a continuation of their faith tradition.

Matt quotes Is. not to say that Is predicted this birth, but to alert his audience that God was once again raising up a ruler from the line of David to deliver God’s people.

He is reminding them to trust the God who has always been faithful.

Matt is highlighting the narrative arch found throughout the whole bible, that we as Gods people are to trust in God that God is with us.

* Gods promise to Ahaz was fulfilled –
  + his neighbouring enemies did not prevail,
  + but since he didn’t trust the next enemy (Assyria) did conquer

So with Matt reminding the listeners of that choice made by Ahaz, he presents Joseph with a similar choice to make

* Jo has learned that Mary is with child and its not his
* He could have her disgraced, death, stoned, (or divorced)
* Betrothal was a more legally binding agreement than our modern engagements
* When an angel appears and explains Gods plan
* Jo has a choice
  + trust in his own plans to divorce her quietly
  + or trust in God by keeping Mary and her child

Unlike Ahaz, Jo makes the right choice. He chooses trust God.

He decided that he would trust Gods promise, that it was better than the option he could come up with.

* He chose to put his trust in God even if he didn’t understand how it would all work out.
* He chose to trust because he believed in the promise of Emmanuel -God with us.

For Ahaz the sign of Emmanuel “God with us” did not feel like a guarantee. He chose rather to trust in his own alliance making plans than in Gods.

To Joseph -Emmanuel-God with us was seen as a promise, a safe guard against whatever was to happen next.

What does Emmanuel mean to us? Do we wonder whether the promise of ‘God with us’ still pertains to us as well?

When we are troubled with illness, disease, death of a loved one, depression, financial distress, guilt or shame – it’s easy for us to think that God has abandoned us and withdrawn Gods offer.

For Jo: choosing to trust wasn’t the easiest or simplest option.

* Jo was a “righteous” man with a good reputation
* He strikes me as a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy
* And he was asked to trust in the plan that would lead him straight into doubt, shame, scandal and controversy. -become the talk of the town
* God asked him to embrace a mess he had not created
* To love a woman whose story he didn’t understand
* protect a baby he didn’t father
* and to accept an heir who is not his son

=in other words, to trust God in the complicated and inexplicable

When I look at it this way, I find it much easier to connect with Joseph. I can relate to a person who struggles do find the right thing to do, with the person who is cautious and wants to avoid controversy.

When Ben and I decided to quit our jobs in Winnipeg -jobs we had university degrees for -to grow vegetable and pigs and chickens, we had to trust.

We had to turn to God to really ask, is this really what you want us to do.

* to turn down job security
* to leave friends and community and church
* to step into a completely different life that would be hard to predict and success was not a guarantee
* I could have used an angel to come tell me that God was with us (G-w-u)
* But I had to trust that God would guide us in this new venture
  + when I look back, I can see the signs (not angel) that G-w-u

I won’t say that every decision I have made has been because I trusted in God. Often I make decisions b/c I have figured it out myself -weighed pro/cons.

But when we turn our tough decisions over to God, and God presents us with the messy/uncertain option (keep Mary/raise the child), it is hard to choose something different than our own plans.

These stories are both here to show us that God is with us- God is faithful -God has always been with God’s people -and it is our choice to decide to trust

-like Ahaz who didn’t trust

-or Joseph who did

When we truly trust a few things happen:

* we let go of the worry /stress /anxiety
* in that release, we can find joy

EX: bungee jumper – if they truly trust the ropes, they have fun

-If don’t truly trust I wont die, so I wouldn’t have fun.

-When we trust that something is in God’s hands, then we are free to find the joy along the way, in the midst of the uncertainty, the chaos, or the mess. We trust in God’s plan and that God will provide and care for us in whatever comes our way.

-in that freedom comes joy

That is the joy that we are invited to this season - The joy that trusting in Emmanuel -God with us – as was promised to Ahaz, to Joseph and still to us today.

As we look to Jesus and believe he is the fulfillment of that name: Emmanuel -God with us.

Then, now and forever.