



ADVENT 4

December 21, 2025

St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Portland, OR

THE LESSONS: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7,17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon Title: “God’s Plan Might Not Look Like You Expect!”

Grace and Peace to you in the NAME of GOD: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction: Failing to See God’s Way

There’s an old story about a man who lived by a river that was flooding. The water started rising, and the police came by and said, “Sir, you need to evacuate!” But the man said, “No, no, God will save me.” The water rose higher, and a man in a boat came by. “Hop in!” he shouted. Again, the man said, “No thanks! God will save me.” Finally, the floodwaters reached the roof. A helicopter hovered overhead and lowered a rope. The man yelled up, “No, no! God will save me!” Well... the water won that argument. The man ends up in heaven, and he says to God, “Lord, I trusted You! Why didn’t You save me?” And God says, “I sent you the police, a boat, and a helicopter! What more did you want?” You know, sometimes we’re so busy looking for miracles that we miss God’s methods. We expect God to show up with trumpets and thunderbolts, but more often, God shows up in ways that look ordinary: A kind word, a nudge in the right direction, or even—a baby in a manger.

Isaiah 7:10–16 — Signs We Don’t See

In our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, King Ahaz is in a panic. Enemies are surrounding Jerusalem, and God offers him a blank check: “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. Ask me for anything, Ahaz!”

And Ahaz, trying to sound holy—just like the man stranded on his roof—says, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.” In other words, “I don’t trust you, God, I’d rather worry my own way!” But God

will give him a sign anyway: “A young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel—God with us.” That’s not the sign Ahaz wanted! He wanted a thunderbolt, an army, a wall, or a brilliant tactical plan—not a baby announcement. But that’s the thing about God’s rescue: it rarely looks like a human rescue plan. Sometimes God’s rescue looks like a boat or a helicopter. And sometimes, God’s rescue looks like a vulnerable, unthreatening baby. Advent reveals to us a persistent God who comes to us not to coerce, but to *win us over* through love. And God chose to enter the world as a baby—then grew up to be a common laborer—a carpenter from Nazareth. Because he lived with us, Immanuel knows exactly how we struggle with faith and life.

Matthew 1:18–25 — Joseph’s Adjustment

Even before Jesus was born, Matthew tells us how Jesus’ earthly father, Joseph, wrestled with his faith. He finds out his fiancée, Mary, is pregnant—and he knows he wasn’t the father. The gospel tells us that Joseph, a righteous man, planned to quietly end the engagement. He wanted to minimize the scandal and preserve his dignity. He had his own plan.

But then God intervenes with a dream: “Don’t be afraid. This child is from the Holy Spirit.”

Can you imagine that conversation over breakfast? “*Mary, I had the strangest dream last night...*” Joseph doesn’t get a full explanation that makes perfect logical sense. He just has enough grace to hear the core message: “Don’t be afraid. God is doing something here.”

And Joseph trusts that message. He adjusts his plans to fit God’s plans, not the other way around. Joseph let go of his insistence on his will being done, and allowed God’s unexpected will to be carried out *through him*.

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19 — The Shining Face

In today’s Psalm, we hear a desperate cry for deliverance: “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.” Like Joseph, the people of God yearn to see God’s face, believing that a glimpse of God’s presence will bring salvation. But when God’s face *does* shine upon us—in the person of Jesus—it’s not a blinding light or an exploding firework. Instead, the face that shines is

the face of a child sleeping in a manger. Wrinkled, sleepy, maybe drooling a little—just like any other baby. God's rescue plan came wrapped not in lightning, but in swaddling cloth.

For those of us who have known disappointment in our lives, the Psalmist laments—when life has "fed us with the bread of tears" and left us scorned— then, comes the good news. When we cry out, "Restore us, O Lord," we are reminded that God's answer is not always a dramatic upheaval, but the quiet, persistent presence of God with us.

Romans 1:1-7 — Plan A All Along

The passage in Romans 1:1-7 provides the cosmic blueprint for all we've discussed. Paul reminds us that this gospel—this story of Jesus—is not a sudden twist or a lucky coincidence. It is a fulfilled promise. God "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son."

What Paul is saying is profound: God wasn't frantically reacting to history. The birth of Immanuel wasn't "Plan B" after humanity messed things up. Jesus was the plan from the beginning. The unexpected nature of God's arrival—the boat instead of angels coming to rescue, a baby instead of an army—(The unexpected nature of God's arrival) was not a mistake, but the precision of a promise centuries in the making. Every promise woven through the Old Testament, pointing toward a King descended from David, found its Yes in Jesus. This deep, ancient planning gives us incredible certainty. If God planned the biggest rescue in history with such meticulous detail, imagine the care he puts into your life. Have you ever felt overlooked, like your efforts don't matter anymore, or that you're past the point of making a real contribution? Paul's message counters that feeling completely. You are not an afterthought to God. You are part of Plan A. And the beauty of this Plan A is that God doesn't just save us; he calls us. Paul says we have received both grace and apostleship. Grace is the power that saves us; apostleship is the calling that sends us out. If God can take a humble manger and turn it into the throne of the universe, and turn a humiliating cross into the victory of all time, then God can certainly work through you—right where you are, right now, with all your current strengths and struggles. You are called to be an essential part of God's great, unexpected Plan A.

The Call and the Challenge: Expect the Unexpected

We all know what it's like when life goes off script. You plan for a peaceful retirement—life hands you chaos. You plan a calm vacation—you end up in the ER. You dream of raising predictable children—God gives you a creative child with... let's call it "extra zest."

Every twist, every detour, every derailment—God keeps whispering: "Don't be afraid. I'm still here."

We pray for rescue and imagine a helicopter swooping in
— but God sends a neighbor with a casserole.

We pray to escape our struggles— instead God walks
with us through the middle of them.

God's signs don't always look like signs. God's rescues don't always look like rescues. God's plan rarely looks like our plan—**but God's plan is always good.**

So when we pray, "Restore us, O Lord; let Your face shine," let's not behave like the man on the roof—waving away the very help God is sending. Let's open our eyes to the quiet ways God is already saving us: through our families, through this church, through love, and through the gentle presence of Immanuel.

So, the next time you feel alone or lost God may not send a helicopter but, whatever God sends you, don't be afraid to take the ride.

God's peace isn't the peace of a trouble-free life. God's peace is the peace of knowing God loves us—strengthens us, guides us, restores us. When you know you are so loved, the Spirit fills you, not only with peace, but joy. And, despite all the darkness in the world around us, we wait with expectation and anticipation of God's light to break in. In the biblical image, we, the Church, the Bride, long for the appearance of the Bridegroom, Christ, so the wedding feast can begin. A feast of the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love, because when God is with us we will rejoice and let our light appear. **(ELW 244, Rejoice! Rejoice Believers)**