My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our expectant Advent hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

These last few weeks, we’ve talked about how we define how we are, and who we are in our Advent journey. We talked about how the world seems to be constantly in a state of disarray we can hardly bear at times. And we talked about how we are on journeys within that change, both as individuals and as a people, for the short years we are here.

And we have traveled between both our Old Testament text, Isaiah, and our New Testament text, Matthew. One of the reasons we do that is so that we can hear those dual messages of both the “me” and the “us”. Typically, when we’re looking at Old Testament texts, they are directed toward all of us, God’s people as a people. There’s directives and wisdom given as to God’s purposes, for sure; but it’s up to the rulers to guide the people toward those purposes. Or else. God’s not happy.

New Testament, however, has been interpreted by Christians to be more directed toward individual faith. It never expressly says that, but it’s one of the things that by tradition differentiates Christianity and Judaism. Jesus still talks to us in terms of what we all should do. Even in the parables, those lessons are directed to us as a people of God. So we have set these texts beside each other so that we can more easily see our Advent journey in those two terms: individuals and as a group, a people of faith.

OK? Okay.

And in today’s text, in Isaiah, if we read a few verses back to include both Chapters 6 and 7, we see what’s happening here. Our old friend Isaiah comes along and gives us a little lesson about ourselves. We like to think that we are good hearted folks who are just a little misguided once in a blue moon. But Isaiah reminds us that we have this ego of ours which keeps us, not God, front and center in our lives. Only when we are satisfied in ourselves, he says, do we think about God, and that self is never, ever completely satisfied. And until we come to understand ourselves in this way, like Isaiah did, we will continue to act out for us first and foremost, and leave the promises of God as things that attack our happiness rather than fulfill it, because it’s hard to break ego gratification. Ahaz has that problem here, too. He wants what he wants and then asks God to bless his choices. The Old Testament is full of these stories of how the kings and princes cannot do God’s will, and the people pay the price every time.

But God said it won’t always be that way. God says that God is not the God of threat, but a God of love. A God that so loves creation that God will come into the world and show us a sign of that love: Immanuel.

Immanuel means what? Right, God with Us.

God helps us understand that it is not a mighty King of force that will make the nations come together. World leaders of mighty nations can’t get past their own framework of who’s the best. So God comes in the form of the ones who are without power, who speak in an entirely different way. No threats. No violence. But just love, to say that only when we think, speak, and act from a place of love can we come closer to fulfillment of the promises of God.

The God of our egos wants to know why we should fall in line. What happens if we don’t do God’s promises? It’s the traditional Old Testament game all over again, testing God to see if we can get away with what we want to do and then having God bless it by not punishing us.

The God of our existence, the one who comes as a small and helpless one, enters into relationship with us as needing all the love we can give in order to see the love that is returned. It’s why Joseph stands up for Mary and her character rather than turns her away. It’s why Mary sings her song to the dispossessed of the world to say that it is they who are first blessed. It’s why the magi from the east come to acknowledge God, and warn the new parents to flee from the political violence to follow from Herod’s search for the baby Jesus.

God comes teaching us what it means to have courage in the face of re-defining ourselves in our uncertainty, fear, and not knowing how things will turn out. God asks us to live with confidence that all will be well, even if today things aren’t so great. If we live in trust, we can have the watchful quietness that Isaiah urged upon Ahaz: “Be careful, keep calm, and don’t be afraid”. Our destination, therefore, is the New Jerusalem, that metaphor that is repeatedly invoked by both God’s prophets and our hearts. And it’s through living in the God of our existence that each of us, and all of us, will get there.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts on this last Sunday of Advent.

This is the Sunday of Peace. Even as our egos strive for attention and recognition of human praise fulfilling our own dreams, our calling is a different one. In looking back at our lives as places that have required new definition, dislocation, departure, and destination, I hope we see how we struggle so mightily to bend the world to our will. And how the Advent season calls us to anew to places that have little to do with fame, fortune, or power.

Faithfulness. Reverence. Trust. Hope. Joy. Peace. And most of all, Love.

Our God cannot be silenced, even in a world which asks us to stop attending churches, and tries to fill the void in our lives with self-gratification rather than self-emptying. God is still speaking. In the small, still voice that we can hear if we have ears that attend. Right here, right now, we are being guided, most often by those who are overlooked right in our midst.

What is our destination, then? Who are the least of us in our lives? And if we see them anew, what would it mean, right here, right now?

Thanks be to God, Amen.