

ADVENT IN ISAIAH: 4. SALVATION

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Isaiah 7:10-16

We are now in the fourth Sunday of the season of Advent. Christmas is just a week away. Our reading for today is a traditional reading for this fourth Sunday. It comes to us from the seventh chapter of the book of Isaiah. This passage may sound familiar to you because it talks about a young woman who will give birth to a child whose name will be Emmanuel. Because the Gospel of Matthew draws upon this passage in the story of the birth of Jesus, it is an easy step for us to make the connection between the Isaiah reading and Christmas. But the passage in Isaiah is not about the birth of the Messiah. Except that it is.

The story we find in Isaiah is one of national crisis, international intrigue, duplicity, all seasoned with a generous seasoning of doubt. The situation is complicated.

In the year 1000 BC, David was king of Israel. At that point in time, Israel was a single kingdom that included all the lands of the Jewish people. It was the Promised Land where the Hebrews settled after their escape from Egypt. When King David died, his son Solomon became king. When Solomon died, the kingdom split into two realms—the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was called Israel and its capital was Samaria. The southern kingdom was called Judah and its capital was Jerusalem.

About 200 years after this split, the Assyrian empire sent its armies against Israel and captured it. They then resettled Israel with peoples from other lands. As we read in 2 Kings, *The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities (2 Kings 17:24).* Israel was Israel in name only.

Several generations after that, we come to the time of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who served the kings of Judah in Jerusalem. And during this time, the Assyrian empire was now knocking at the doors of Judah.

In our reading for today, the king of Judah is Ahaz, and Ahaz is facing a national crisis. Israel is now a nation again, but it is also an adversary of Judah. Israel has formed an alliance with its neighbor, Aram. These two nations have approached King Ahaz to urge him to join with them and form a coalition to fight off the Assyrian threat. (I told you that it gets complicated.)

It is here that the prophet Isaiah enters the picture. He urges King Ahaz that whatever he does he must follow God's will. Ahaz is terrified because if he does not

join this coalition, those two nations will attack. On the other side, if he does join the coalition, there is a possibility that they will lose to the mighty Assyrians.

So, what is God's will? Isaiah urges Ahaz to turn to God and ask for a sign. *Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.* In other words, ask God for whatever sign you need. Nothing is off the table. God will direct you on the path you are to take.

But Ahaz responds with a "no". He says, *I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.* To be fair, this sounds like the proper response. Remember how Moses had commanded Israel as they wandered in the wilderness, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested God at Massah (Deuteronomy 6:16). For this same reason, Jesus said this as he was being tested in the wilderness. Testing God is a sign of weak faith. Do we test God to check if God truly has power? Do we say things like, If God is real, then God will (fill in the blank). We are not to test God; we are to trust God.

So, it seems theologically reasonable that Ahaz would decline from testing the Lord.

But there is a reason that Ahaz refuses to test God. If God shows him a sign, then he will be compelled to follow that sign, he will have no choice but to obey God's will. But Ahaz has already made-up his mind on what he plans to do. But Ahaz has already decided on his course of action. He plans to side with the Assyrians because he figures this is the best way to protect himself and his people.

In fact, he had already begun to align with the Assyrians. He did not trust in God's salvation.

But Isaiah will not let Ahaz off so easily. Isaiah confronts the king and tells him that like it or not, God is going to present a sign to him. What happens next is that it appears that Isaiah points at a young woman who is present in the room with them. She is undeniably pregnant. She is undeniably pregnant with child. Isaiah argues that this is the sign from God. This young woman will very soon bear a son and will name him Emmanuel. We know that in Hebrew the name Emmanuel means *God with us*. By the time the child is two years old, when he is weaned from his mother, those two kings that have been threatening Amoz, the king of Israel and the king of Aram, they will be of no consequence any more.

This is the lesson for Advent that we find in this passage, the message that God is with us. This does not only mean that God is with us to watch over us and care for us, it also means that God is irrefutably always with us. We cannot run or hide from God. God will always be there because God made a covenant with Abraham, and God keeps God's covenants.

When Isaiah identified the woman who was pregnant with child, he was making the point that she was obviously pregnant and that her giving birth was inevitable. Nothing could stop it. That is the covenant with God. It is a given that God will be with us.

As I said, this passage from Isaiah has nothing to do with the birth of Jesus and yet it does. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read the story of Jesus' birth and once again we discover the inevitability of God's being with us. I would like to read that story now. <Matthew 1:18-25>

- 18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.
- 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.
- 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
- 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
- 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
- 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."
- 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,
- 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The joy of Christmas is that God loves us so much that God came to us as one of us—as a small and vulnerable infant. God didn't come as a warrior king seeking vengeance. No, the sign of God is a child.

As we read in Psalm 23, *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

But since it is nearly Christmas, I would like to consult one of the great theologians of our time, Theodor Geisel, also known as Dr. Suess. In his book, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the Grinch attempts to literally erase Christmas in

Whoville by taking all their presents and decorations and food. This story is clearly an objection to the commercialization of Christmas. But I believe that it also speaks to our passage from Isaiah. Despite the Grinch taking all their Christmas accoutrements, On Christmas morning, the Who's still gather to sing (something the Grinch despised).

Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!"
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

Christmas does in fact mean a little bit more. It means that God is committed to being with us offering us the path to salvation. The word of Isaiah to King Ahaz is a message that echoes down the centuries all the way to Matthew who used it to remind an unwed father to trust in God.

In this season of Advent, we are given the opportunity to prepare our lives for the reality that God is truly with us. Instead of being terrified, we should rejoice that our creator loves us so much that he came to us