

Sermon – “Be Not Afraid”
Sunday, December 22, 2019
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25
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Our first reading comes from book of the ancient prophet Isaiah, in the seventh chapter, verses ten through sixteen. God speaks here through Isaiah to King Ahaz, who is facing disaster as two other kings have joined together to attack Jerusalem. Centuries later, the early followers of Jesus recognized these words to have a cosmic layer of prophecy as well, foreshadowing the coming of another child who would mean salvation to the whole world. Hear now the words God brought to the people of Israel at this long-ago time of crisis:

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

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Our Gospel reading today comes from the book of Matthew, chapter 1, verses 18 through 25. Listen now for God’s Word to you.

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.

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When I was in probably the seventh grade, I was working one day on a project of some kind. I do not recall what I was trying to do that day, but I do recall that it involved moving something from one place to another, and that our next-door neighbor had a wheelbarrow. I borrowed that wheelbarrow from him and completed whatever it was that I had wanted to do with it, and then went on with my afternoon. As boys of that age are sometimes wont to do, I moved so quickly on to whatever was next that I never revisited the wheelbarrow, and nighttime found me sleeping soundly, borrowed property forgotten and left outside in our front yard.

The morning came, and as I readied myself for school, my mother asked, as mothers are wont to do about anything their sons have touched, “Did you remember to put away that wheelbarrow?” I immediately went out the front door and found: the wheelbarrow was gone! And I knew perfectly well I had not put it back where I got it.

I rushed inside, unsure what to think, and my mom gently pointed out to me that this was an expensive wheelbarrow, the kind contractors use, maybe worth as much as seventy dollars, and an easy thing for someone driving by in the nighttime to notice and toss quickly in the back of a truck. This was a dreadful thought, sudden and distressing, the recognition that I was going to have to tell my neighbor I let his wheelbarrow get stolen and somehow come up with the money to replace it.

There are a couple of much more distressed people in our scripture readings today. I’d like to spend some time looking closely at both of these readings and what they say. The first reading today came from Isaiah 7. We start with verse 10. “Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,” it begins, “saying, ‘Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.’”¹

We are coming into this story in the middle, so allow me to explain what is going on. Ahaz is a king of Judah, the southern half of the then-split kingdom of the Israelites. Ahaz, ruling in the 8th Century before Christ, is described elsewhere in scripture as a wrong-headed king who offered worship to false gods and may even have sacrificed his own son to one of them.² But here we see him in the middle of a national crisis. Two kings, the king of Aram and the king of the northern Israelite kingdom, have made an alliance to attack Jerusalem, hoping to install their own ruler there.

The people, understandably, are frightened by this threat. God, however, just prior to our passage, has declared to Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah that he is not to worry, that these two hostile kings are not to be feared, because their plans to conquer Jerusalem shall not come to pass.³ It is at this point that we hear the talk of asking for a sign. “But Ahaz said,” the scripture continues, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign.’”⁴

Here I’d like us to pay careful attention. Listen for what the sign is.

¹ Isaiah 7:10-11 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² See 2 Kings 16:1-4.

³ See Isaiah 7:1-9.

⁴ Isaiah 7:10-14a (*NRSV*).

“Look,” says the prophet, “the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose kings you are in dread will be deserted.”⁵

What does this mean? The idioms are a little foreign to us. But curds and honey are imagery used by the ancient Hebrew writers to reflect prosperity and peace. During wartime, luxurious foods were not likely to be found. What this prophet is telling Ahaz is that before this baby is even old enough to know right and wrong, he will be eating luxurious things, the crisis will be past, and the invading kings’ own lands will be deserted.

This sounds like a wonderful promise. But there’s an odd thing here, and maybe you have noticed it. In case you have not, listen to this recap: *Don’t worry about these invading armies*, the Lord said. *They will come to nothing. And here is a sign for you: A child shall be born, and before he is very old at all, the invaders’ plans will have come to nothing.*

Does that really sound like a sign to you? If you are trying to offer proof that your prediction will come true, don’t you need to offer evidence that can be seen *today*? This seems rather like a scenario in which you go to the doctor and are informed you only have six months, and you have a conversation with God about it, asking to know whether you will be healed, or if this is your time to be called to heaven, and God says, “I have heard your prayer, and you will be cured.” “How do I know this will happen—can you give me a sign?” you ask. And God says, “Here is your sign: seven months from now you will still be here.”

What kind of use is a sign like that, which can only be seen *after* the things it signifies are over with?

Ahaz is not alone in this. Joseph faces a similar struggle with looming disaster and perplexing signs. Let’s flip over to the first chapter of Matthew, in chapter 1, verse 18. Here we get part of the birth story of Jesus, a section focusing on Joseph. Joseph, too, is in crisis. In the church during Advent we spend a lot of our time considering the coming birth of Jesus, which is the most important thing, and we spend some time thinking about the rough spot Mary is in, but Joseph, too, has just had the rug pulled from under his life’s hopes and dreams.

“When [Jesus’s] mother had been engaged to Joseph,” Matthew tells us, “but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”⁶

Now we sometimes give Joseph some credit for being gracious and not planning to publicly humiliate Mary, and sometimes give him some criticism for wanting to toss Mary aside, but I’m not sure we always fully take a moment to comprehend his situation: a person engaged to be married who discovers to his great distress that his fiancée is pregnant, knowing full well the child cannot be his. Unless there is a tragic reason for such a situation, it is a rare person, and probably an unwise one, who would follow through with a marriage under those circumstances. None of us would likely ever advise a friend or loved one to go ahead and marry a person who has already proven to be unfaithful.

⁵ Isaiah 7:14b-16 (NRSV).

⁶ Matthew 1:18b-19 (NRSV).

It is in this moment, with Joseph's hopes for the future collapsing in a drastic way, where he gets his own visit from a messenger of God. "...[J]ust when he had resolved to [dismiss her quietly], 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"⁷

Here we have another assurance, but here also a case of someone who has to consider why to believe it. The angelic visit to Joseph was surely a powerful experience, but it came in a dream, and we have lots of dreams. Can a dream be a sign? Perhaps, but of what? Surely many of our dreams are signs of nothing but our own anxieties, hopes, joys, and fears. And the closest the angel gets to offering anything beyond that is, just as in the Isaiah passage, a promise of something that will not be seen for a long time to come: Why should Joseph trust and do what he is told regarding the coming child? "For he will save his people from their sins," Joseph is told.

This sounds more than a little similar to the promise to Ahaz. Both of these men are told, in the middle of crisis, that God is showing up on the scene and intervening, taking what appears to be a clear disaster and flipping it over entirely, and that a child about to be born is a demonstration of God's salvation. But in either case, the supposed future of the child is hardly a reassurance today.

So I return to our earlier question: what kind of a "sign", what kind of reason for trust and obedience, is a sign you can only see *after* everything has come to pass?

I believe there is an answer, and it is found in the name of the child. "[T]he young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."⁸ "El" is one of the Hebrew words for God, and "Immanu-el" is a name which means something like "God with us."

And the other child? Maybe you noticed an oddity in the naming of the second child. What does Matthew say? "'She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'"⁹

Wait, you might ask—how does naming him "Jesus" fulfill what is being described as a prophecy that he shall be named "Emmanuel"? That's worth taking a moment on, as well. "Jesus" is the Anglicized version of a Latin word originally written in Greek that would probably to its Jewish speakers have been pronounced "Yeshua." "Yeshua" means "Salvation," and

⁷ Matthew 1:20-21 (NRSV).

⁸ Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14b. Worthy of comment: perhaps you have noted that there is a slight difference between this and the Isaiah text that we saw (e.g., "young woman" vs. "virgin"). This stems from the fact that our own Bible's version of Isaiah comes from assorted copies of ancient Hebrew texts that have survived to the present, translated directly; whereas Matthew was quoting from a much earlier translation that had been done from Hebrew into Greek, which was then of course further translated into English. Obviously, we do not have the very first copy of each book ever written, so the typical practice is to translate from the best sources we presently have of each document independently.

⁹ Matthew 1:21-23a (NRSV).

probably more specifically, “God’s salvation.” It is actually perfectly reasonable to say that “God’s salvation” is the fulfillment of a prophecy of “God with us.” Yeshua, or Jesus, *is* Emmanuel.

But where does this get us? I think it is the clue to the whole question. The declaration to Ahaz that this child of a besieged Jerusalem would very soon be eating curds and honey was not meant to be a sign for the people *that the siege was going to end*. It was a sign to be understood only later, after the siege had ended exactly as God had said it would. A sign of what? Of something much bigger than the outcome of a particular historical crisis: a sign *that God is with us*. That is what Immanuel means. They weren’t getting proof of what was about to happen. They were getting proof, fully recognizable only afterwards, that God was with them all along.

And so it is with the promise given to Joseph. He, too, was told of a coming child. And there was absolutely no way for him to see or understand the worth of his obeying and dutifully raising that child until far later, when the prophecy of that child could finally be seen to be true: “he will save people from their sins.”

This kind of trust seems foreign to us, and hard. *Here is a promise, it says, and a hope, and the only sign I give you is one you will understand long from now.*

But maybe it is not as foreign as we think. Any of us who are parents, or teachers, or coaches, probably have made promises like that ourselves. And any of us who have had parents, teachers, or coaches, surely have heard them.

For the youthful mind doubts, sometimes, that the adults in its life are truly on its side. “Why are you against me?” we all wanted to ask at times, when corrected by our parents. And sometimes truly the only answer that can be given at that time is, “I *am* on your side. This is important. Someday you will understand.” And indeed, mostly, we eventually do. We see the character we have learned, and only from that vantage point can we see that we *do* understand, and we *are* better for it, and our arrival at that point is a sign, that our parents *were* on our side after all.

Seventy dollars is a whole lot of money to a twelve-year-old (or at least, it was in 1990). It was probably the vast majority of my personal savings at the time, and earning that again, or waiting for that much to accumulate in five- or ten-dollar birthday card gifts, was going to be a long, sad process to which I had resigned myself by the time I returned home from school the day I lost my neighbor’s wheelbarrow.

I was very surprised, then, when I made one last check, peeking into the neighbor’s garage...and there, sitting in plain view, was the wheelbarrow! I rushed inside to share the news, and my mother confessed: she and my stepfather had seen it irresponsibly left out overnight, and they had moved it themselves, but had chosen not to tell me so that morning, so as to give me a day to ponder a lesson that I clearly needed to learn about how to treat other people’s things. I was relieved, and not with the kind of relief that one can forget about immediately. The lesson was clearly powerful enough that I recall it still, thirty years later.

The real point of today, of course, is to recall something much more powerful than that, something which we recall across all of history: the sign the world received in the promised coming of a little child, and the truth made plain in that sign—God is with us, has been with us all along, and will be with us all along, as we anticipate Christ's return. For God with us—Immanuel—is God our Salvation—Yeshua, Jesus. And he will save his people from their sins. Amen.