

The Virgin Is with Child

Isaiah 7:10-16

Lessons from Isaiah: Images of God's Messianic Kingdom on Earth

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Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows, put to flight. Emmanuel, God be with us in the midst of the darkness and the gloom.

God is with us--Emmanuel--but God is not with us because things are good. This prophecy that we have read today comes at a particularly gloomy time in the nation of Judea. King Ahaz is not a happy person. It says in the text that he is literally shaking out of fear in his heart because his supposed friends and others from Arabia are coming to attack him, to besiege Jerusalem. He is very concerned. To create protection around him, he makes a treaty with the king of Assyria. He thinks by attaching himself to that king who has great power and military strength, he will be protected. He pays off the King of Assyria out of the treasury of God's temple. He takes the sacred money, money that had been given by the people to do God's work, and he uses it for defense of the nation, to pay off Assyria.

God is not happy with Ahaz. Ahaz is not particularly interested in God. They have a mutual dis-ease with each other. In that context God does not abandon Ahaz. When we are in a dis-eased relationship with God, there is no evidence in scripture that while we would just as soon leave God alone, God does not leave us alone.

God continues to address Ahaz in the form of Isaiah, the prophet. Recognizing Ahaz is in dis-ease because of the gloom and doom facing him, Isaiah comes to him and gives him clarity to say, "Ahaz, if you will put God to the test, if you will place your faith in God, if you will ask God to do something and show you a sign, God will do it for you. Ahaz, what of it?" And Ahaz has the gall to say, "I'm not interested in putting God to the test." And out of frustration, Isaiah says, "How long will you weary God with your disinterest and your apathy? Don't you see that your nation is being threatened?"

God is with us in the midst of the most difficult places, even when we don't recognize it. Even in the happy times of Advent and Christmas, gloom and despair can sometimes carry us into dark places. I call your attention to what happened in southern California at the Crystal Cathedral this past week. On Thursday, before their great celebration of the glory of Christmas when 2,000 people were expected in that wonderful cathedral, the co-director of music pulled out a gun, fired a few shots in his office, and drove everybody out of the building. The program was shut down, and the swat team called in. It did not end well. At one o'clock Friday morning, he took his life.

How is it that a person who has directed literally hundreds of anthems -- who has heard the gospel thousands of times -- who has been a part of the wonderful music in the most glorious place, can be so depressed, so full of despair. Robert Schuller said it is because there is a disease, and the disease killed him.

Ahaz is diseased here. He does not believe God is interested in him, and he is not interested in God. He is disinterested to the point that God cannot even give him an open-book possibility for creating a sign. God says, "You pick, Ahaz. It can be something from the highest heaven to the deepest part of the earth, or on the earth. You name the sign, and I will make it happen. And Ahaz has the audacity to say God, "I don't need that, I don't need you." So God says, "I will name a sign." And the sign God names is in this simple statement, "A young woman shall be with child." I can almost see the look on Ahaz' face. Is this a big deal? There are young women with children all over the place. In this church, this is particularly true. No it was an ordinary statement. But here is the extraordinary thing: God gives an ordinary sign of everyday life that will result in something extraordinary happening.

Not in the Old Testament but in the New Testament, Matthew changes the language and says a virgin shall conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they shall call his name Emmanuel. The fulfillment of the prophecy is much greater than the prophecy itself. The prophecy comes in a time when Israel is at a difficult place--where Judah is despondent. God makes a prediction--a promise that something better will come. And the sign will be when a young woman has a child. Matthew hears the gospel in such a unique way that he says not just any young woman but this is the young woman Mary who has never been with a man. She is a virgin and the Holy Spirit has given her the ability to birth this child. In the midst of even these dark times, during the time of Mary and Joseph, that good news begins to ripple out in a quiet way and change the world.

Ahaz has made a mess out of the nation. It says in the Chronicles and the Kings that he did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord. In the time of his distress, he became more faithless to the Lord. All hell was breaking loose, and he was wandering farther from God. By his poor leadership, Ahaz was bringing Judea and the people of God down to nothing. In that context, even while the people are paralyzed and Ahaz is not able to do anything, Isaiah is literally stuck in his fear. Isaiah comes to Ahaz and says, "Get a grip." "Try me," says the Lord. "You're breaking down on your own initiative. Things are not going well because you're in charge. Try me, I'm the living God. If you put me in charge things may go better." And Ahaz says, "No, thanks." But God does not give up. Just because we say, "No, thanks," to God does not mean he stops acting in history. God still gives the sign.

You may reject the gentle waters of the presence of God (Isaiah says to Ahaz) but guess what's coming--that nation that you built a treaty with, that Assyrian nation, is going to be hired like my barber and he is going to shave you clean. Literally, it says in the text. I don't think Ahaz got the message until it was too late. And he had the close shave.

Jesus Christ comes because Mary is a virgin. She is open to the Holy Spirit who will give her a child. The prophecy anticipated that, but it did not explain it in the detail that shows up in the New Testament.

I remember that time in the life of the Presbyterian church in the 1960s where you could almost see the Sunday that the pastor was bound and determined to get up after we had discovered that the Isaiah passage really meant young woman, and the pastor preached the sermon that Mary was not in fact a virgin. The bible doesn't say that. Churches in southern California went from attendance of thousands to attendance of hundreds and tens overnight. Because the Presbyterian Church was jettisoning the historic orthodoxy we have affirmed since the beginning of the apostles and the prophets: that Mary, the virgin, will have a child and his name will be called Jesus, God with us.

It is part of the baptismal formula of the early church, "Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary." Another one, "who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary." "The one born of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin." The eastern baptism, "in fleshed by the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin." The Latin Nicene Creed read, "incarnated by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary." It is so fundamental to our faith that we say it every Sunday, and we said it again today. And it is fundamental to our faith, not because the Old Testament had clarity about it, but because the revelation amplified it and made it clear. That's what happens between New Testament and Old Testament passages: God gives us a glimpse in the sign of the reality that is to come and then shows us a much greater reality when the truth of the sign is fulfilled. There is a promise, but what happens as a result of the promise in history is something more marvelous, more imaginative, more creative than what the original sign implied.

Our Presbyterian Church was going in the opposite direction. Rather than seeing the magnificence of the increase of the sign, we were affirming the decrease of it in history and wondering why people were leaving the church. Without a virgin birth, there is no incarnation, there is no human Son of God. The very humanity of Jesus and the Son of God who taught and showed us who God is walking on earth, is not valid. It is the core of our faith. Now that it isn't to say that you can't disagree or doubt it. That's fine. But don't replace the orthodoxy of it for the rest of us. God's sovereignty permeates the promise.

When God makes a promise, the promise is fulfilled in greater ways. God gives us much more than we expect. The good promise is given a better fulfillment. Matthew saw the bigger picture. When he heard about Mary, he understood that she was the one prophesied in ordinary ways by Isaiah. The promise is good but the role fulfillment is much better. The Old Testament is absolutely necessary to the New Testament, and the New Testament completes, fulfills, magnifies, and explains what the Old Testament means, through the person of Jesus Christ.

It is foundational to our Reformed faith that Jesus Christ interprets everything in the Bible. Without Jesus, the Bible doesn't make sense. Without the New Testament, the Old Testament is incomplete. Our Reformed tradition is that Jesus interprets all the passages that are hard to understand. If it is not clear, then look at Jesus' life. If it doesn't make sense, then see what Jesus said and did. The promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

We are created for promise as people. We live into promise. As children, our parents give us a sense of promise. As members of the church, we have the church value a sense of hope and promise for us for the future. If there is not promise, we have no future. We can be surprised by the wonder of the elegance of the fulfillment, which is much better than the promise itself.

In 1980 after I had sensed I was being called to be a Presbyterian pastor, I was in a worship service of a memorial event for the Reverend Dr. Louis Evans, Sr. the father of Louis Evans, Jr., the former pastor of this church. At that service were people of Louis Evans' family and friends, including Louis Evans, Jr. I was singing in the choir with Paul Showan. In the midst of that service, I had an overwhelming sense that God was reaffirming my call to be a Presbyterian pastor. Watch out when God gives you a sense of call and promise, because all hell may break loose right after that.

As I was going through the ordination process, one of the pastors in the Presbytery who had significant leadership role, said to me, "Over my dead body will you be ordained in the Presbyterian church." And I was thinking: how could I kill him. It wasn't long after that I was in conversation with a church about a call. My wife resigned her job, we sold our house, we were practically packed up and moved to Oklahoma, and the congregation split on the vote and we had to say no. In case you are worried that that was about me, it wasn't: it was about the political intrigue in the congregation itself.

So we went back to California; she asked for her old job back. We asked the people to whom we were selling the house if they would like to sell it back, and they said, "Yes." But it didn't get better after that. It got tougher. I didn't have a job. I said, "God, where's the promise?" I spent time wandering around the desert in southern California selling film to make money for the family. I was pulling up weeds in front of the church to make some money for the family. God, where are you? Where's the promise. Two years later a call came to a better church, a better position for both my wife and me, and it was a better place for my family. God always fulfills the promise better than we can anticipate.

In 1986 when I was part of the church in Dallas, Texas, about two o'clock in the morning, I received an emergency call. There was a family at the hospital who had just birthed their new baby girl, and there was trouble. The child was born with water on the brain, and the doctors were predicting she would not live through the night. They were calling two pastors to come and pray for the child and, in a sense, give the equivalent of last rites. We laid hands on the mother and the child, and, almost at the same time, we both said, "This may sound strange, but God wants us to tell you that this child is going to live and graduate from high school." I thought I was nuts to say that. I don't go around saying that sort of thing, by the way.

I hadn't seen that family for the last eighteen years until I recently visited Chicago and went to visit the family. And there was Libby, eighteen years old, after 54 surgeries dealing with the nerves in her brain and the way her body functions. One of the things they said was outstanding about Libby's life was that every time anything was said about God, the Holy Spirit, or the presence of Jesus Christ, she becomes ecstatic. She goes bonkers for Jesus. I mentioned Jesus Christ in the conversation, and she lit up like a light. They said she has been the best blessing in spite of all the pain, injury and hurt she's had. God's fulfillment was much better than the promise.

Even though it was a little sign that a young woman would conceive and bear a son, God made sure it was a special moment when a

virgin conceived and bore the Son of God. And that sign is given to us that we might affirm it, generation after generation, knowing that God fulfills promises and does a better job in fulfilling them than we can possibly ask or imagine. In this church's future, the best is yet to come. Not because all hell won't break loose before it happens. If God gives us a promise, you can bet there's going to be darkness trying to get rid of it. If you are in a place in life where you think darkness is prevailing, then lean into this promise. Test God like Ahaz refused to do and say, "God, will you prove yourself to be present and true here in my life and our life together because we need to know you're here?". That's the faith that I affirm when I say that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. May that change your life.

Amen.