

They Shall Call His Name Immanuel

Matthew 1:18-23; Isaiah 7:1-17

Well, the first thing we want to note about today's passage is that two generations have passed since Isaiah first had his vision of the Lord in the temple with the warrior angels shaking the beams and doors of the place and terrifying Isaiah with flame and smoke and the terrible, thundering sound of their voices. All that took place in the last year that poor, old King Uzziah was alive. But the story Isaiah tells us this morning takes place two kings later! So Uzziah is gone, and his son, Jotham, has lived out his reign and is gone and now on the throne is the grandson, Ahaz.

So some decades have gone by since Isaiah was first called to bring a gospel to God's people that we learned last week that few of them would want to hear. So Isaiah was likely a young man when God first appeared to him in Isaiah 6, our passage last week, but here in Isaiah 7, he is at least middle aged when God calls him to gather up his son, Shear-Jashub, and go confront King Ahaz, who appears in our story this morning to be inspecting the water sources that would supply the Holy City should an enemy army cut Jerusalem off from the surrounding countryside.

And Ahaz is thinking about water and sieges because he has finagled himself into a crisis. What's happened is that out in northwestern Iraq a huge sinister empire has arisen, the Assyrians, and they were looming over their neighbors in Syria and Israel much as the Nazi's loomed over Czechoslovakia and Poland in the 1930's just before World War II. And like the Nazi's, the Assyrians were overwhelmingly powerful and desperately cruel.

And just like Europe in the 1930's, the three kings who each ruled small, weak kingdoms, Rezin in Syria, and Pekah among the northern tribes of Israel and Ahaz in Jerusalem couldn't agree on a plan to protect themselves against the big, bad Assyrians. Now biblically speaking, there were no good guys in this story. Rezin the Syrian and Pekah the Samaritan were only less dangerous than the Assyrians because they lacked the power and wealth to be quite as bad.

And Ahaz was likely the weakest of the three, weak first because God's people in general had forgotten God's law and fallen a long way down, and he was weaker still because Ahaz himself had no faith in God. What little Scripture he knew he twisted to suit his own wants and needs and fancies. So we learn from the Bible, in 2nd Kings, chapter 16, that Ahaz's response to the crisis was to try to cozy up to the Nazi's, the Assyrians. King Ahaz actually remodeled God's temple in Jerusalem so that something like Assyrian worship could be offered there.

But even with all that, God sends Isaiah out to the reservoirs to offer Judah's wicked king a word of hope and encouragement. But before we unpack their little visit, I'd like to briefly wonder out loud what Isaiah's been up to in the decades since he saw the Almighty thunder through the temple in flames and smoke and had his lips scorched by the Seraphim on his way to becoming a prophet. And I think there are two safe answers I can offer you. The first is that Isaiah has been preaching gospel to his lost and clueless, morally blind, unhearing neighbors. And like John the Baptist and Jesus after him, Isaiah's gospel consists about in equal parts with warnings and visions of terrifying judgments interspersed with words of promise and grace and hope.

But the other occupation Isaiah pursued through all those years was that of being a husband and a father to a number of sons who appear in his stories and presumably daughters as well. Because when society goes wrong, when the fences are down, and no one can be trusted and nothing can be relied upon, the center line to that straight and narrow path that leads to heaven is marriage and family. And this calling to love and be faithful to a spouse and to welcome and nurture children will become the central strand in Isaiah ministry, particularly as we look at Isaiah, chapters 7 through 9, this Christmas weekend. Because as I've already noted God commands Isaiah to confront Judah's clueless king, not alone but in the company of Isaiah's own son, who not coincidentally has a prophetic name.

We have to presume that Isaiah didn't name his son, Shear-Jashub, because he thought it would work well on the playground. And in fact it turns out that in Hebrew, Shear-Jashub means "A Remnant Shall Return". So the boy's name was meant to convey something of both warning and hope to anyone who met Isaiah's son. The warning was that exile was on the way, most of God's people in Isaiah's day would lose the homes and lives they'd built and they would have to relearn their faith as slaves and refugees in a foreign land. But the hope was that they would not all be lost there. Some of them or perhaps their children would survive the exile and escape the captivity to return to Israel and wait as God's people for the hopes and dreams Isaiah had promised them.

So Isaiah brings his boy to offer a word of hope from God to a king who had never given God the time of day. And somewhere on the aqueduct, the prophet found Ahaz and told him, "*Take care to stay calm, and don't be afraid nor let your heart be faint because of these two burnt over stumps, these smoking firebrands, at the sound and fury of King Rezin from Syria and the prince of Ramalial!*" It seems fair to ask what would possess the Almighty to reassure and encourage a king like Ahaz who was so far from anything Moses had ever taught or anything David had ever stood for.

And as Isaiah goes on, we find out! The prophet says, *“Because Syria with Israel’s northern tribes has devised evil against you, saying, ‘Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves and set up our man, the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of Judah!’”* So God is taking up Ahaz’s cause, not because he likes Ahaz, but because the Syrians and Israel’s half pagan northern tribes would destroy the house of David altogether if they were ever allowed to succeed.

And that can’t be because Isaiah has been saying all along, for decades now, that it is from *“the stump of Jesse”*, Judah’s royal family tree, a branch would grow, that a Savior would come with the Spirit and wisdom and power and justice and grace to undo all the craziness that tears marriages and families apart and ruins whole societies and drives whole peoples and nations to war.

And it’s not without irony that Isaiah is inspired to picture the royal family trees of Rezin the Syrian and Pekah the Samaritan also as burning stumps. Because that’s how he’s been picturing Ahaz, from the house of David, all along! So all three kings in this crisis is a burnt over stump as far as God is concerned! But Ahaz, as pathetic a king as he was, was Jesse’s stump, the stump from which a shoot would rise to bring us Christ and for that reason alone, Ahaz would be allowed to stand.

So God rules for Ahaz’s family tree against the other stumps, *“It shall not stand,”* God says, *“and it shall not come to pass! For the head of Syria is only Damascus, and the head of Damascus only King Rezin, and within sixty five years Israel’s northern tribes will cease to exist as a people.”* And then God exhorts King Ahaz, *“...if you are not firm in faith, you won’t stand at all!”* So God is willing, even at this late date, even after Ahaz has been so far wrong, for this crisis to be an opportunity for David’s poor lost great-great-great grandson to find and show some faith.

God inspires Isaiah to make King Ahaz an astounding offer: *“Ask a sign from the LORD your God; let it be as deep as the grave or as high as heaven!”* Now this is as close to a blank check as God is ever going to offer anyone! But astoundingly, King Ahaz wants no signs from God. He shrouds his answer in some false piety he borrowed from Moses’ Law. Like I said before, Ahaz knew some Scripture.

But the heart of the matter was that Ahaz had already decided to cozy up to the Assyrians and he wasn’t interested in any signs or messages from God that might infringe on his freedom of choice. And Isaiah the prophet understood Ahaz’s game. So he answers for God, *“Now listen, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men with your nonsense, that now you weary my God as well?”*

It is a momentous thing to be offered grace by God and to turn him down. It is a breathtaking mistake, but Ahaz has fended for himself for so long, bent God's word to seek his own wants and needs and fancies for so long, that grace and forgiveness and protection from God have no attraction for him, he's fine as far as he's concerned. There's plenty of water out here for a siege. So this breathtaking sign that God had offered Judah's blind and stupid king will still be offered, but to people with ears to hear and eyes to see and minds and hearts to care.

Isaiah goes on, *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. The boy shall eat curds and honey when he knows to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. But the LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your father's house such days as have not come since the northern tribes departed from Judah. God will bring on you the king of Assyria!”*

So Ahaz could have had mercy from God. Ahaz could have thrown himself and his people into the care of God. But instead God gives him a sign that is in its own sense a parable against Ahaz. We all know that, long in the future, an unmarried maiden, a virgin from Nazareth, would miraculously conceive and give birth to a son who quite literally will be God with us, the stem from Jesse's stump, the branch from David's family tree, who will be for God's people everything that Ahaz couldn't bring himself to be. So even in judgment against Ahaz, Isaiah is given a message of hope.

But Ahaz will never see it! Before the boy is weaned from his mother's breast, Isaiah says. Before the boy Jesus ever visited his Father's house and missed the caravan home, Ahaz and his crisis and the foolishness of his posing and manipulation will have long become tragically irrelevant. Strangely, in Isaiah's next chapter, he himself will lay with his wife, whom he calls *“the prophetess”* and they will conceive a son, not Immanuel, this boy gets another name. But Isaiah's son also will serve as a marker, a reminder to Ahaz that, in the time it takes for a little boy to learn right from wrong, Rezin and Pekah and their little war of the stumps will have become the least of Ahaz's problems.

Syria and the northern tribes will gone before Isaiah's little boy learns right from wrong, and the Assyrians will betray Ahaz, who has sold his soul to win their favor! And the irony here is that Isaiah has framed his parable to Ahaz in terms of little boys learning right from wrong, the one lesson that Ahaz, Judah's decadent and manipulative grown up king, never was willing to learn. Jesus in his time and Isaiah's boy back there and then both will learn right and wrong in about the time it takes for Ahaz to be shown up as foolish and evil.

And this will matter because all of Isaiah's next chapter will be devoted to his own response to the crisis that caused King Ahaz to forfeit his soul, and to place his kingdom in such danger. We'll read some of it tomorrow night as we sing our carols and light our candles, but for now it's enough to know that Isaiah's response to a society that had lost God and lost its way was to focus in on the centerline of the straight and narrow, his wife and his children and on those few people who weren't too intoxicated with wants and needs and fancies to see signs and hear a word from God and take it to heart while grace was still on offer.

Tomorrow night, we'll hear Isaiah sing: "*Bind up the testimony! Seal the teaching among my disciples! I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. Behold, I and the children the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel...*". It was Isaiah's family, his children, who served as a sign that God was still there in an era when life was coming apart. I visit lots of older folks and they've all told me that they feel for parents who have to raise children in this day and age when the fences are down and wild tides and currents are in play.

But the very act of keeping faith with parents and spouses and children and siblings against those tides carries more weight and has more power than any of us know. Husbands and wives, mothers and fathers have to matter in a story that begins, "*For to us a Child is born...*"