

Immanuel
Isaiah 7:1-16

Have you ever felt trapped, like there's no way out? Ahaz, King of Judah would have understood. To his north was the kingdom of Israel, also called Ephraim. To the north and east of that was the kingdom of Syria. Well, Pekah, the king of Israel and Rezin, the king of Syria, decided to form an alliance to defeat Assyria, the most powerful nation in the known world at the time.

But here's the catch. They wanted all the little nearby kingdoms to join in their alliance against Assyria. So, in the diplomatic fashion of the day, they made war on Ahaz, invading the territory of Judah and besieging Jerusalem. They would either lift the siege after they had drawn Judea into their alliance and after they had installed a puppet king on Ahaz' throne, or they would just destroy the place.

But even if Ahaz had managed to appease these two invading kings of Israel and Syria, even if he managed to keep his throne, not to mention his head, he would have been heading into a conflict with Assyria, a much greater threat. As the old saying goes, he would have been jumping out of the frying pan only to land in the fire.

Now, none of us are involved in such grand geopolitical conflicts, but that doesn't mean we and our loved ones don't face equally fearsome foes: debt, grief, unemployment, the pandemic, other chronic illness, long-term disability, difficulties with parents or children or spouses or maybe all at the same time. And sometimes the only way to work on one problem makes the others worse. You might need to keep your business open to provide for your family and your employees, but COVID restrictions don't allow you to. Or you might need to work longer hours to improve your financial position, only to find your family situation deteriorating. You might need advanced medical treatment to improve your health, but paying for it would drive you deeper into debt. There just doesn't seem to be any way out. The situation is impossible. What can you do?

It was while Ahaz was contemplating such cheery choices, and while he was inspecting the waterworks that would allow his capital city to withstand the besieging Israelites and Syrians, that Isaiah came to see him. And Isaiah brought Ahaz a word of hope.

But this wasn't the Pollyanna sort of hope that denies the reality of our problems. No, in verses 5 and 6, Isaiah acknowledges the serious situation in which Ahaz finds himself. He knows that the kingdoms of Israel and Syria have made an alliance against Ahaz. He knows they plan to set up the "Son of Tabeel" on Ahaz' throne.

But it is precisely in the face of this very real trouble that the Lord tells Ahaz to be quiet, to be calm. It is precisely at the time that Ahaz' enemies are surrounding him that God tells him, "Don't be afraid and don't be fainthearted." And those words come to us, too, and for much the same reason.

Look at verse 7 – God acknowledges the hostile plan of Ahaz' enemies, but then flatly states, "It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass." And so, the main reason Ahaz had to set

aside his fears is because God had made a promise to him, a promise that his enemies would be thwarted. And that promise was in large measure based on another one of God's promises, one much older, one that had endured across many generations.

And in order to understand that promise we need first to take a look at the curious way in which God refers to Pekah, the King of Israel – He always calls him “the son of Remaliah.” In the same way, God refers to the nameless guy who Pekah and Rezin plan to make king of Jerusalem as simply “the son of Tabeel.” Who's Remaliah? Who's Tabeel?

That's really the point – they were a couple of nobodies. You see, Pekah was the first of his family to be the king of Israel. He had been an officer in the Israelite army, and had seized power through a military coup. His father, Remaliah, hadn't had any power at all. And as far as “the son of Tabeel” goes, well, we haven't a clue who he or his dad was.

It is in contrast to these two nobodies that we see Ahaz' proud genealogy presented in verse 1 – he was the son of Jotham, who had reigned over Judah for 16 years. He was the grandson of Uzziah, who had reigned for 52 years before that. Ahaz wasn't a flash in the pan, a dictator with no dynasty, a historical hiccup like the sons of Remaliah and Tabeel, whoever they were. No, Ahaz came from a long line of somebodies.

And verses 2 and 13 remind us of the reason that Ahaz' family had held power for so long. For Ahaz belonged to the house, the dynasty of David, the king to whose family God had promised perpetual power. In fact, God had gone so far as to tell David, “Your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.”

In short, the reason Ahaz could be sure that his enemies' plans would not succeed was because God had already made a promise that David's dynasty would endure. God thus called Ahaz not to be afraid or fainthearted, but instead to trust in the promises of the Lord.

Well, what about us? Hasn't God made promises to us too, promises that have come through the mouths of the same prophets? In fact, one of those prophecies is the sign that Isaiah gave to Ahaz in verse 14, the focus of our celebration in this Christmas season: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel,” a name which means, “God with us.”

That's why we should have no fear, even in the face of our worst problems. That's why we shouldn't become fainthearted, even when it looks for all the world like there is no way out. For God has kept His promise: Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David has come to rule and reign over the earth, to conquer all our enemies, to cast down even the powers of sin and death. As we sang just a few moments ago, He is the Savior, the Son of God. What reason have we for despair? What room have we for fear? He is the King of Glory – and He is God with us.

But how was the birth of Jesus a sign to Ahaz? After all, the events of today's passage happened more than 700 years before Jesus was born. Ahaz never heard the angels sing. He never saw what the wise men and the shepherds saw. How could he have drawn strength or encouragement from the tremendous fact of the Incarnation?

Well, that's precisely the point. For remember, in verse 12 Ahaz insisted that he didn't want a sign from God. In other words, even in the face of his overwhelming problems, he wasn't really interested in God's help.

Instead, as we find out from II Kings, he was making his own plans to save himself and his people from the Israelites and the Syrians. And how would he accomplish this miracle? By throwing in his lot with the even more powerful Assyrians, by giving them tribute money, thus bribing them to come and attack Israel and Syria to get those two smaller kingdoms off his back. In other words, he engaged in what we now call "triangulation," pitting one enemy against another.

But his new Assyrian friends led him in all sorts of bad directions. For when he paid a visit to Damascus to meet his new overlord, Ahaz saw an altar there that he really liked, an altar that must have been much more impressive than the one already in the Temple of God in Jerusalem. And since he was, after all, solving his own problems by using his own wits, and since the Assyrians seemed to be gaining a lot of success by worshipping their gods in their ways, and since he was anxious to prove his loyalty to his Assyrian friends, he made a copy of that pagan altar in Damascus and installed it in the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. In other words, he decided to worship God in the way he wanted to instead of in the way that God had directed back in the time of Moses.

But that wasn't the end of it. For Ahaz also began to mimic many of the religious practices of the Canaanites, the people who had lived in the Promised Land before God led His people to live there. Ahaz went so far as to burn at least one of his own children alive as a sacrifice to these false gods. It turned out that he was willing to look anywhere and everywhere except to the Lord to solve his problems.

Now, I doubt that any of us would commit infanticide. None of us would ever make any sort of sacrifices to foreign gods. But, when we find ourselves in impossible situations, instead of looking to the God for whom nothing is impossible, do we ever rely on our own ingenuity? Instead of trusting in the baby born of a virgin, Jesus Christ, do we find ourselves giving in to despair or discouragement? Instead of trusting in Immanuel, God with us, to rule over our enemies and solve our problems, do we ever prefer the advice of our friends, even if that advice doesn't agree with the Scriptures? Do we rationalize away God's Word in order to do what makes sense to us? And if so, could we be missing the sign, like Ahaz did?

Well, what did Ahaz' disobedience mean for him? It didn't undo any of God's promises. In fact, God still solved Ahaz' immediate problem. God still kept Syria and Israel from conquering Judah, just like God said He would. Moreover, by the hand of the Assyrians God would render the land of Ahaz' enemies, the land of Ephraim and Syria, desolate and forsaken. That's why the people there would have to eat things like butter or curds and honey – that was the food of nomads and foragers. In spite of his lack of faith in God, Ahaz would still keep his head and his throne.

And Ahaz' disobedience didn't keep Jesus from eventually being born of a virgin just like God promised in verse 14. Ahaz' disobedience didn't keep God from keeping the promises

that He had made to David so many years before, promises that one of his descendants – Jesus Christ, would sit on David’s throne forever. And none of our disobedience will prevent God from keeping any of His promises to His people, either.

But Ahaz’ disobedience did mean that Ahaz wouldn’t share in any of those blessings. Instead, just as Isaiah had told him in verse 9, since he would not believe, since he would not trust God, he would not be established – his kingdom would not endure.

For God would eventually bring down on Ahaz’ kingdom the wrath of Assyria, the very people in whom Ahaz had placed his trust. In fact, in the days of his son Hezekiah, the Assyrians would invade Judah and lay siege to the city. All of Ahaz’ diplomatic triangulations, all of his attempts to ensure his people’s security by currying favor with the powerful Assyrians would go up in smoke.

Moreover, because of Ahaz’ and his descendants’ disobedience, the royal house of David would eventually be sent into exile along with the rest of the people of God. David’s line would be plunged into such obscurity that when the child would eventually be born to a virgin some 700 years later, that heir to the throne of David would not be born in the royal palace in Jerusalem. He would be born in a stable in Bethlehem. He would not grow up not as a prince but as a carpenter.

And Isaiah points to that mystery in verse 15. For it isn’t just those who are forsaken of the Lord who will be forced to eat the food of foragers – the miraculous child born of a virgin will eat curds and honey as well.

And that may be the most amazing truth of all. For in Jesus Christ, God did not just come to solve our problems and difficulties, and to do so at arm’s length. No, He has come to be Immanuel, God with us, even in the midst of our suffering, even in the midst of the suffering that our disobedience has brought on us or others. That’s the miracle of God’s grace that we celebrate this time of year.

So of course we should not fear, no matter how heavy the loads we might bear – for God, the mighty Son of David, the Lord of all the hosts of Heaven is with us. Of course we should not be fainthearted, even because of our disobedience – for God has come to suffer with us and for us, to be born into poverty and to hold His royal scepter with nail-pierced hands. So let us not deny the sign. Let us not continue in our disobedience. Instead, let us trust Jesus’ promise that, no matter how things may look today, no matter how painful and slow our steps may be, God is with us.