

The Sign

Isaiah 7:10-16

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We have dropped right into the middle of a story. “Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz.” Ahaz was the king of Judah. At this particular point of time Israel had split into two nations. The northern kingdom retained the name Israel and had its capitol in Samaria. The southern kingdom of Judah had its capitol in Jerusalem. Ahaz was the king of Judah, and chapter seven begins by telling us Israel, the northern kingdom, had made an alliance with the nation of Aram to attack Judah, the southern kingdom. This attack struck fear in the hearts of Ahaz and the people of Judah. We are told the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken. They are being attacked. Understandably, they are afraid. At this time of great fear and anxiety the prophet Isaiah approaches the king with a word from the Lord. “Keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart...” The Lord tells Ahaz not to be afraid or lose heart because both of the kingdoms forging the attack will soon collapse, or as the prophet puts it, they will be shattered.

It turns out the Lord isn’t done with Ahaz. This brings us to where our passage picks up this morning. “Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz.” God has already said to Ahaz keep calm and don’t be afraid. Don’t lose heart.” Now God says, “Ask for a sign.” God wants to give a sign so that Ahaz knows he can trust in the Lord. Did you notice what Ahaz does? Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign. “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” On the surface Ahaz seems to act admirably by not wanting to put the Lord to the test. But God’s response indicates something more is going on. When Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign God says, “You’re trying my patience.” I wonder what that’s about. How is refusing to ask for a sign trying the patience of the Lord?

“At first, it seems that Ahaz is piously following the law of God, but as Isaiah makes clear, the king is missing the point of God’s offer entirely. Ahaz does not test God if he accepts God’s free offer; rather God is testing Ahaz. When Ahaz refuses the sign, he is actually refusing to trust in the living God who is speaking to him.”¹ If Ahaz asked for a sign and God gave a sign, then Ahaz has some skin in the game. God has shown a sign, and now Ahaz is faced with the decision of whether to trust this God or not. Refusing the sign is a sign of his unwillingness to trust God.

¹ Patrick W. T. Johnson, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, p. 77.

Well, God is not limited by Ahaz's unwillingness to ask for a sign. The passage we read tells us God gives a sign. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) Later we find out these things came to pass. A birth takes place just as the Lord said. God gives the sign just like he said. And guess what? Ahaz responds just like we would expect. He still doesn't trust God. This might all be a nice little window into the long and involved history of Israel and Judah and a people of God who struggled to trust in God through many kings and conflicts except for something that happens hundreds of years later.

A man and a woman are engaged to be married. They have followed the Jewish law carefully, the law about not having sexual relations until the marriage is completed. But then the word comes to the man that the woman to whom he is engaged is pregnant. She is with child. He has not had sexual relations with her. Alarm bells go off. In that culture, in that community, her act of becoming pregnant outside of marriage is a terrible shame. As the offended one, and as the man in a culture that favored men, he had the option to shame her, disgrace her, and cause her great harm. However, this man is described as a righteous man. So rather than disgrace her publicly, he decided to end their relationship quietly. And then the Lord intervenes. The Lord gives the man a sign. By now some of you recognize this is none other than the story of Joseph and Mary as we find it in Matthew one. Joseph did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, so he decided to divorce her quietly.

"But after he considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'" It is right then that the sign given to Ahaz so many years before leaps into the story of Joseph and Mary. That very same sign, a virgin who will be with child and give birth is the sign for Joseph. Ahaz saw the sign but even then did not trust in God. Knowing that Ahaz did not trust in the sign, we can't help but wonder how Joseph will respond? What will Joseph do? Will he respond with trust? The answer is not just a resounding yes, it is a beautiful yes. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." One commentator boils it down to this: "Joseph trusts the dream. He does what he's told, and thus the savior of the world is born."²

² Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, October, November, December 2016, p.37.

Joseph's first instinct, his desire not to publicly disgrace Mary, was to divorce her quietly. Now instead of putting Mary away, Joseph stands with her. Knowing the shame and disgrace Mary would face in that cultural setting, maybe Joseph does more than stand with her. Maybe he stands between her and those who would judge, who would shame, who would condemn, and who would humiliate her. Joseph receives the sign, and in response he trusts God. He trusts God by standing with Mary, and maybe even standing in front of Mary, to protect her and preserve her life.

The sign was that the virgin would be with child and give birth to a son. And the son would be called Immanuel, which means "God is with us." On this last Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday before we gather on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the World, Immanuel, God with us, on this last Sunday of Advent, I wonder what it might mean for us to respond to the sign. The virgin was with child and gave birth to a son and we know him as Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Joseph responded by trusting God. What might it look like for us to respond to the sign, to the sign that God is surely and truly with us. What might it look like for us to trust God? If we have received the sign that God is with us, what might it look like to live as ones who trust God?

If we truly trusted the sign that says God is with us, maybe we would start a kindergarten. Last May we were approached by Barry and Shelly Dawson, missionaries with the Presbyterian Church in Southeast Asia, to see if we would host them for an evening so they could tell about the mission work the church is doing in that region. We hosted them and it was a very meaningful evening. At the end of the evening our Mission Committee gave them a check for \$1,000, and the look of gratitude on their faces was priceless. Because we have a relationship with them we now receive their newsletter. Recently Barry and Shelly Dawson wrote about a Filipino village called Tondo, which is in Manila. Manila is a huge city of 25 million people, and this district of Tondo is home to some of the poorest of the poor. One community in Tondo lives under a bridge.

As they toured this poverty-wracked community and came face-to-face with the packed-and-stacked squatters, they wrote, "we wondered about the dismal futures facing their children. We asked ourselves, 'Where is the church for the fragile ones who live under the bridge? And to muse more profoundly, even more viscerally, 'Where is God for the broken ones who live amidst hunger, disease, neighborhood crime, and domestic violence that surely are part of the high-risk life that unfolds along the mud pathways of the barangay and in the dark shadows under the bridge?'" When we believe the sign of Immanuel, we believe God is with humanity even in the most desperate situations.

Where is God? Barry and Shelly discovered God is with the children of Tondo. God is with them through a Presbyterian Church mission partner—the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. These Christians who have trusted the sign that God is with us practice social justice and they stand in solidarity with the poor. They heard the cries and they responded. They started a free kindergarten for 50 kids who live under the bridge. That kindergarten has been in place now for nine years. When kids get an education they get a chance. Those Christians in Manila have stood with the children. The article ends on a sobering note. Enrollment is down to 41 students this year. They don't have the funding for the full 50 students in the free preschool. How much would it cost for a child to get that free education. The answer is \$500. Maybe the \$1,000 we gave last May ended up going to two little boys or girls who are now in kindergarten. I don't know, but I am so thankful that because the sign was given, because the virgin was with child, because Jesus was born into this world, because he is Immanuel, because God is with us, that some faithful Christians are standing up for helpless little boys and girls half way around the world, so that they can have a future.

What might it look like if we truly believed the sign, if we truly believed God is with us? We have a friend in California. We met him when he was working as a missionary in an urban area. He is African-American. He is a big, strong man, but he has been literally brought to his knees by the hatred of racism. This week he told a story about standing in line to get a donut at a store in California. He said the line was long. And then he said an angry white person came up and started haranguing him with racist comments. The man's face was contorted with hatred. Our friend, even though he is a big and strong man, he simply smiled, gave the man the peace sign, and turned away. The man kept yelling. Then our friend said something pretty special happened. Another man, our friend said he was a man with brown skin, came and stood between our friend and the man who was yelling at him. And then an older white woman approached our friend and asked if he was okay. Eventually several others stepped up and told the man yelling the hurtful and hateful things to stop. The man finally stopped and left. Our friend was obviously upset by this whole event. But what he focused on were the ones who stood with him, who stood by him, who stood up for him. In a world where those who are vulnerable, who are different in a variety of ways, who seem to be fair game, who endure judgment, rejection, condemnation, it must mean so much when the sign of God being us leads people to stand up, to stand by, and to stand with the ones who are vulnerable. That's what Joseph did when he stood by Mary. He trusted the God who gave the sign and he stood up and he stood with Mary.

If you believed the sign that God is with us maybe you would do what Roy did. Roy would cut up a grapefruit every single morning. Roy was just an ordinary guy. He came to a Men's Group I led. He would sit in the circle quietly listening, and then every once in a while he would chime in with a joke or a humorous anecdote. He was a fun person. He kept a slot machine in his house, and it paid out real money. People who visited got a thrill out of that. Roy loved to fish and he took an annual trip with buddies, and those guys would come back with some hilarious stories. Roy liked slot machines and good jokes and fishing, and then one day I found out Roy liked grapefruit.

Actually, I don't really know if Roy liked grapefruit. But his wife Ellen did. I know that because Roy asked if I wanted to go with him to visit Ellen. Ellen didn't live at home with Roy, at that home with the slot machine. Ellen lived in a care facility, a care facility for people who were dealing with Alzheimer's. So I got in the car with Roy and we drove to see Ellen. We walked in and Roy said hi to her and gave her a kiss. She smiled but didn't say anything. With tears in his eyes Roy said, "I'm not sure she remembers me." Then he took Ellen to a table where they sat together. And Roy got out a grapefruit and proceeded to cut it up, and then bite by bite he fed his wife Ellen the grapefruit. As he fed her he said grapefruit was her favorite thing. So every day Roy visits Ellen, gives her a kiss, cuts up a grapefruit, and feeds it to her bite by bite. Some 50 years before Roy and Ellen stood at the altar and said until death do us part. They said in sickness and in health. And because Roy believed in the sign that God is with us, he continued to stand up for his wife, to stand by his wife, and to stand with his wife. It made me think of a phrase that touches a very tender place. Many like Roy who have watched a loved one go through Alzheimer's have said it. "She doesn't remember me. But I remember her."

When our kids were young, we spent many an afternoon out on the sports field with this really loud and funny woman, and we came to love her and to relish her enthusiasm. So when we stood by her on the field one day and she was quiet and subdued we took notice. She eventually told us that one of her daughters had been diagnosed with cancer. Over the next several years whenever we would see her on the field she would give us an update. Then one day she was smiling, happy, overjoyed. Her daughter had completed her treatment and was pronounced cured.

The next time we saw her was a few months later. She told us the most amazing story, the most beautiful story, and yet a story that just about broke our hearts. Her daughter continued to do well, continued to be cured. But during her treatment, her daughter had made friends with the others who were also going through cancer. One of the friends she made did not get better. So our friend's daughter went to visit her friend. She went into her home. Her friend was in bed, sick, suffering, and in pain. Our friend's daughter stood there, and then she went up to the bed, she

pulled back the covers, she climbed into the bed with her friend, wrapped her in her arms, and simply held her. Sometimes when we have believed in the sign we stand up for people and we stand with people because we know God is with us. This young woman climbed into bed and wrapped up her friend. She believed the sign that God is with us. She was convinced God would not let go of her friend. So she pulled back the covers and climbed in bed with her friend.

We got to know an older man named Leroy. This was many years ago in a church far, far away. Leroy was a good hearted man and always upbeat. Until the day he stood up in church and asked us to pray for his granddaughter, Emily Jane. She had a disease that was causing her kidneys to crystallize, or calcify. She lost one of her kidneys. So we prayed for her. A few months later Leroy asked us to pray for Emily Jane. Her other kidney was failing. She needed a transplant. So we prayed. Finally, there came the day when they found a perfect match for Emily. And the person who was the perfect match was willing to donate his kidney. It turns out the person who was the perfect match was Emily's own father. It makes perfect sense that a father would be willing to make this type of sacrifice for his child. But nevertheless we all rejoiced that the father was able to stand with his daughter, to stand by his daughter, and to stand up for his daughter.

It seems to me there is something beyond the response of Joseph and all the others I have mentioned today. Or maybe what I really mean is there is something behind the response of Joseph and all the others. Better yet, there is someone behind the response of Joseph and all the others. That someone is Jesus. When we receive the sign that the virgin will be with child and will give birth and the child will be called Immanuel, which means God is with us, we would never dream of ending our story with the birth of the Christ child.

- So when Joseph stands up for Mary, stands by Mary, and stands between her and her accusers, we can already anticipate the day when Jesus will stand up for sinners, for the outcasts, for the broken hearted, for the weeping, for the mourning, and for those desperately in need of love.
- When Christians go under a bridge in a slum where no one else would go and decide to start a kindergarten, we know that Jesus would do exactly the same thing, because he stood against a crowd, even his own disciples, who wanted to push children to the side, and he said, "Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to these."
- When a few people in a line waiting for donuts come to the defense of a black man who is being attacked with hateful words, we can just imagine Jesus standing before a crowd and saying, "You have heard it said you shall not murder, but I say unto you that even your words of anger and the words you speak that demean your fellow human being, even your words are liable to judgment." And when our friend chose to turn away from that anger, we can

imagine Jesus nodding in affirmation for one who chose to turn the other cheek and go the second mile, trying to find the grace to love one who chose to be his enemy.

- When a faithful husband sits with his wife and feeds her grapefruit long after her memory is gone, we can see Jesus sitting with them at that table, holding the hand of both the husband and the wife, whispering his words of eternal promise, “I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you. You belong to me. See, I have your name written right here on the palm of my hand.”
- When a young woman’s compassion leads her to pull back the covers of the bed and climb in to hold her dying friend, we know that Jesus pulled back the covers of this earth and climbed in with us, to hold us, to comfort us, to reassure us we are not alone.
- And when a father gives up a kidney for his daughter, doing anything he can to save her life...that one gets to the heart of the matter, doesn’t it. For there comes a day when Jesus will do not only everything he can for us, he will do the only thing for us that will bring salvation and forgiveness of sins and rescue us from death and give us the gift of new life. He will give up his life for us on the cross.

This story isn’t just about a man named Ahaz who would not trust God. And this story isn’t just about Joseph. It is about us, about you and me and all of God’s precious children. It is as if the angel were saying to us this morning, “Do not be afraid. A child has been born for you and his name is Jesus. His name is Jesus because that name means he is our Savior, he saves us from our sins. Jesus is the sign, the surest, most amazing, most awesome, most wonderful, and most trustworthy sign that God could give, the sign that God is with us. God is with us. God who loves the world and proves that love by dying for us on the cross, that God is with us. May our hearts be filled with the faith of Joseph. May we also be ones who trust in God.