

## *The Emmanuel Child*

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Matthew 1: 18-25

There was a problem with the office computers and the supervisor needed a staff member who was at home. He called the house and a little voice answered in a hushed tone. He began, "Is your Daddy there?" The child answered, "Yes." The boss asked, "Can I speak with him?" The child answered, "No."

The supervisor thought for a moment and then asked, "Is Mommy there?" The child answered, "Yes." The man asked, "Can I speak to her?" The child answered, "No."

Getting a bit exasperated, the boss asked, "Are there any other adults there?" The child answered, "Yes." Thinking he was nearing the end of his conversation with this child, he asked, "Who's there?" The child answered, "A policeman." Now concerned, he asked, "Can I speak to the policeman?" The child answered, "No. He's busy." The man inquired, "What's he busy doing?" The child replied, "He's talking to Daddy and Mommy with the fireman."

Now it was getting disturbing. To add to the confusion, he heard an oddly familiar noise. "What's that noise?" the man asked the child. "A helicopter."

Very concerned, the supervisor asked, "Why is there a policeman, a fireman, and a helicopter there?" The child giggled and said, "They're looking for me."

We're looking for the child during Advent, expecting along with Mary. Yet we really don't know what's coming much less what we should be looking for. We're not alone in our confused state. The coming of a child who brings God's blessing is recurrent in scriptures. We frequently run into barren women who are surprised by the blessing of God that has miraculously come upon them. These children become the heirs to the covenant, the servants of God who extend the promise to new generations, who seek to advance God's Kingdom in their lives and works.

Okay, something more is happening in the New Testament with Mary, but the idea is the same: God promises a child who will advance and fulfill the ancient promise for God's people.

In the reading from Isaiah, we have a continuation of the prophet's encounter with King Ahaz of Judah that occurred in the preceding verse of chapter 7. In those verses, we hear Isaiah's summons by God to confront King Ahaz who sees the armies of two small neighbors menacing Jerusalem, the armies of Aram and Israel. These northern neighbors were being threatened from the north by the mighty army of Assyria. These small states wanted Judah to ally with them and join the fight, but King Ahaz of Judah declined. Then those nation-states decided to attack Judah and install their own king who would do their bidding.

Isaiah is told that King Ahaz is ruled by fear; *the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.* King Ahaz believes that Jerusalem will be conquered unless he makes an alliance with a major power, like the up-and-coming Assyrians. The Assyrians are such a threat to Aram and Israel that surely those kingdoms will withdraw their armies. The only problem is that an alliance with Assyria comes at a precious cost to Judah, probably some “protection money.”

Isaiah’s word to King Ahaz is that these powers are “two smoldering stumps.” (Look, here is the image of the stump again!) What they have schemed will **not** work, and their time as kingdoms capable of doing anything to Judah and Jerusalem is quite short anyway, hence their depiction as “smoldering stumps.” The handwriting is on the wall for them. The final word from Isaiah to Ahaz in the preceding passage is this: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*

Apparently King Ahaz is pondering his options. He’s pondering and pondering. He is coming to endorse the option “do nothing.” He is even convincing himself that “doing nothing” **is** being faithful to God. Yes, doing nothing is what will demonstrate his faithfulness before God. God will handle it. The King needs to do nothing. The King is wise *and* faithful. Ahaz is ready to pat himself on the back.

In today’s passage, Isaiah (and God) can’t stand it any longer. Isaiah demands, *Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or the highest heights.* Isaiah is literally begging with the king to *do something* that will put the king in a frame of responsiveness to God. ‘Seek a sign,’ pleads Isaiah, ‘ANY SIGN! ANYTHING!’

The king has now fully justified his indecision, rationalizing doing nothing by saying: *I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.* Miraculously, this indecisive coward of a king has suddenly discovered **piety**. He has discovered that piety is a tool he can use to justify doing nothing. Because this corrupted notion of piety is disconnected from any serious faithfulness, it’s simply stupid.

Isaiah recognizes hopelessly stupid when he sees it and isn’t going to waste any further time. The prophet asks, *Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? The Lord himself will give you a sign...* since you’re too useless to simply ask for one yourself. He tells the hapless king what God is doing:

*The young woman [virgin] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. 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 two kings you are in dread will be deserted.*

The name *Emmanuel* we know means ‘God with us.’ Ahaz is told that the presence of God with his people is imminent, as a pregnant woman about to give birth, God’s presence is **that** close.

By the time the child is able to discern good from evil, only a few years hence, the child shall eat curds and honey. It means that those with whom Emmanuel abides will enjoy sweet prosperity and good times. King Ahaz, the times of blessing are not far off, if you could simply be faithful. But since you can't find your spine much less any faithfulness, condemnation comes in vs. 17: *The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father... he will bring the king of Assyria.*

We see that what seems to be the easy way out, the willingness not to act, not to decide, not to make a choice, not to take a stance, that path lacks the key ingredient of faithfulness. Those who embrace healthy faith are able to make decisions, can decide not only right from wrong, but also **faithful** from **faithless**.

The coming child, Emmanuel, is a witness for the faithful that God comes to be with God's people who are fearful, anxious, and desperate. It is God's witness of shared **purpose** with God's people as well as shared **presence**. This is 'Emmanuel' – literally 'God with us.'

Now let's consider poor Joseph. I know, I know, how about 'poor Mary' – she's the one who's pregnant by whatever miraculous means, and has to bear the child along with the scorn and the other things that come from being an unwed pregnant young woman. For a moment, we're going to give Joseph a break and show him a little love.

This guy Joseph thought that this gal Mary is the one for him and plans to wed her. Then he finds out she's pregnant. That wouldn't be a big deal, except he ... um ... hasn't ... like ... done anything. He hasn't *done anything*. So now he needs to ... well ... *do* something. I mean he can't pretend like there isn't anything happening. Mary certainly isn't, but she can't seem to explain her new condition. She says it's an act of God. That's a tough one, isn't it? It's really gotten very messy. The best thing to do would be to quietly set aside their plans and part company. Like, 'let's be friends.'

But then Joseph had a dream with an angel who told him that this was part of God's plan, having brought about this mysterious pregnancy. Mary will bear a son who is to be named *Yeshua* or Savior. The angel said that this *Yeshua* will save his people from their sins. There is a clear allusion to the well-known passage from Isaiah that speaks of the coming of Emmanuel – God with us – who will bring blessings to the people.

Like King Ahaz, Joseph doesn't seek a sign. Indeed, one was already given to him by Mary and her mysterious pregnancy – the blessing of God. Joseph can be forgiven (in my mind, at least) for believing that separating from Mary would be best. Yet, this angel in his dream has shaken him. Again, he didn't ask for this sign, but now Joseph feels he has to reconsider.

As Joseph comes to this crossroads, he's like King Ahaz, pondering in his heart and mind what has been revealed to him. Where Ahaz constructed a facade of faithfulness by refusing to ask for a sign from God – his false piety, Joseph seems to possess genuine faith.

Joseph isn't given any particularly new insight in this nocturnal vision from an angel. The angel simply confirms and expands on what Joseph had learned from Mary. The decision before him isn't altogether clear even now. If it were not for a genuine heart of faith, Joseph wouldn't have continued with Mary, wouldn't have sustained the journey of heart and spirit to which God invited him.

Joseph required strength in his faith to make the choice of being obedient to the will of God, a strength of faith that King Ahaz never had. What sets Joseph apart is that he believes that God **is** active in his world. Yes, God is doing things around God's ancient promise with God's people. For Joseph, it simply makes sense in his heart of faith that God's promise involves him, calling him to take a stand that – let's face it – he'd rather avoid.

Along with Joseph and Mary, we're told that the Savior is coming. What do we need saving from? Isn't this "saving" all about forgiveness for our sins? Isn't it all about us getting eternal life? Well, yes, those are certainly aspects, but sadly many people stop there with their understanding of salvation. Forgiveness and eternal life – that's what Jesus is all about.

Because we think that our sins are the only thing we need to get changed, so that, like, they don't count any more, we can deceive ourselves into believing that Jesus brings cheap grace for his friends in the church. Of course, if that was the case, we wouldn't have to imagine sitting in Joseph's shoes, making decisions about how we will respond to God's coming into our lives.

Yes, Emmanuel is God's coming among God's people. Yes, it is the Savior who brings forgiveness of sins and the promise of life eternal. But there's more.

God is coming into our lives, our daily living, urging us to follow faithfully the light of the Spirit who illuminates a different path from our customary ways. Living a life that is "saved" means living a life that does saving. I don't mean pressing Bible tracts into people's indifferent hands. I mean a life that sacrifices self for others, that reaches out to the untouchable with compassion and grace and love, that lifts up the weak, seeks healing for the suffering, offers plenty to the impoverished, acceptance to the outcast and alien, and justice for those who are trapped in oppression.

God is coming into our lives, and the promise is that God will mess up our lives just like God messed up Mary and Joseph. If we seek the Chosen One who comes, our faith will be tested and our paths will become much less familiar and predictable. But the true life of faith sojourns without knowing exactly where the road leads, what experiences will arise, or what challenges will stretch us and teach us.

God is coming into our lives. Now it's your turn. You decide. Is the coming of the Chosen One good news for you, or not?