

Immanuel, Messy Child of God's Promise

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 his home. He called the house and a little voice answered in a hushed tone. He began, "Is your Daddy there?" The child answered softly, "Yes." The boss asked, "Can I speak with him?" The child answered softly, "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, "Okay, 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; we're expecting right along with Mary and Joseph. Yet we really don't know what's coming exactly much less what we should be looking for. We're not alone in our confused state. The coming of a long-awaited child who brings God's blessing is recurrent in scriptures. We frequently run into childless 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, their works, and throughout their society. 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 hear about a mysterious child. We have a continuation of the prophet's encounter with King Ahaz of Judah. Previously, we heard 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 together 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” for starters.

Isaiah’s word to King Ahaz is that these powers – Aram and Israel – 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. It’s all very messy. He’s pondering and pondering. It is such a mess that 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 will demonstrate his faithfulness before God. God will handle it. The King needs to do nothing. Ah, 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 **in**decision, 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** of all things! He has discovered that piety is a tool he can use to justify doing nothing. Yet, since this corrupted notion of piety is disconnected from any serious faithfulness, it’s simply stupid.

Isaiah recognizes hopelessly stupid when he sees it and he 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 Immanuel. 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.

We know that the name *Immanuel* 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 promised 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 Immanuel abides will enjoy sweet prosperity and good times. Hey, 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 of the mess, 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 promised child, Immanuel, 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 'Immanuel' – 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, a phrase usually found in insurance policies covering instances of unnatural disaster. That's a tough one, isn't it? Yeah, 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. (She was right! Again.) Mary will bear a son who is to be named *Yeshua* or Savior. The angel said that this *Yeshua* will save God's people from their sins. There is a clear allusion to the Isaiah passage that speaks of the coming of Immanuel – 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 the unusual, complex, and rather messy situation that has been revealed to

him. Where Ahaz constructed a **facade** of faithfulness by refusing to ask for a sign from God – Ahaz’s 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 difficult 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 see through the mess, be willing to remain in it, and make the choice of being obedient to the will of God; it’s 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. The problem is that when God acts in a surprising way, God is very willing to make a mess of our lives, turning everything we had supposed, everything we had valued, and everything we had planned inside-out and upside-down. For Joseph, it has simply made 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.

Yes, Immanuel is God’s coming among God’s people. Yes, it is the Savior who brings forgiveness of sins for God’s faithful, entry to the Kingdom way of life, and the promise of new life. 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. That can make it a venture into the wilderness; it will mess up life’s order and patterns. Living a life faithful to the Kingdom promise means sacrifices of self for others, reaching out to the untouchable with compassion, grace, and love, lifting up the weak, seeking healing for the suffering, and liberation for those in bondage. It means offering 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, ready with a messy promise for those who are faithful. Now it’s our turn to decide.