

For the past three Sundays, we’ve heard the prophecy of Isaiah. He told us, “*Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore*” in 2:4, “*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them*” in 11:6, “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy*” in 35:5-6. Today we hear another prophecy: “*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel*” in 7:14.

I should point out, some translations prefer the wording, “a young woman,” or “a maiden,” but let’s not quibble. The message is clear: God will give a sign of what the future holds, and it will confirm, once more, the absolute sovereignty of God over all creation and God’s resolute determination to *redeem* his people and *reconcile* them to himself.

Before we examine the passage more closely, I need to ask you to do some serious thinking. Many of you have heard this passage read every Christmas since you can remember in connection with the birth of Jesus. And, I dare say, you’re likely to hear it again in Christmases to come. That’s why we love this passage—it seems to fit the Christmas story so well. What we overlook is the fact that Isaiah lived 700 years before Christ and that he was prophesying to the people of his day, perhaps without any futuristic knowledge whatsoever of Joseph, Mary or the baby Jesus. To be fair to Isaiah and to hear God’s Word proclaimed in this passage, we need to first read it in the context in which it was written. That means we’re going to have to step back in time—27 centuries back—which will require some effort on our part.

Everyone ready? The year is 735 B.C., and the setting is this: There are three small tribal states—Syria (known as Aram), Israel and Judah. Looking at a map, they’re lined up in a row from north to south. Further to the north and east of Syria is the large nation of Assyria. Assyria had become so vast and militarily strong that it was only a matter of time until the Assyrians turned

south and attacked the lesser kingdoms of Syria, Israel and Judah. To prepare for the inevitable, the two northern kingdoms of Syria and Israel formed an alliance. They figured when the Assyrians attacked, they'd fight together to maintain their independence.

To bolster their strength, they asked Judah to join them. But the king of Judah, King Ahaz, said no. He felt sure they'd be no match for the mighty Assyrian army and he was afraid that when the king of Assyria saw what they were planning he would wage war on all three nations. So, King Ahaz refused to join the coalition and this so upset the kings of Syria and Israel that they attacked Judah. This is where our story for today picks up. Isaiah writes in 7:1, *"When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it."*

The Syrian and Israelite armies weren't strong enough to breach the walls of Jerusalem, but they were able to put the city under siege. Fortunately, the people of Jerusalem had stockpiled grain and as long as their water supply wasn't cut off, they were safe. But the clock was ticking. How long could they hold out? Isaiah says *"so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind"* (7:2) They were running scared.

One day, King Ahaz went up to the Pool of Siloam to check the water supply. At the same time, the Lord spoke to Isaiah and told him to find the king and tell him not to worry: *"Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all'"* (7:7-9).

Isaiah found the king and advised him to stay the course. Trust God and be patient, he said. The siege would be short-lived. Besides, hadn't God promised that a descendent of David would always sit on the throne of Judah? But, as we

all know, things like this are easier said than done. It's easy to trust God when things are going our way, but when we're under siege—when business is bad, or a relationship fails, when the stock market plummets or our health weakens; when things are not going our way and we've tried everything and nothing seems to work—it's at times like these that we're most likely to lose confidence and panic and go chasing after other gods.

It's like the story of the tourist who went to the Grand Canyon, stepped too close to the edge and fell off the cliff. Luckily, there was a scrub brush growing out from the hillside, and, as he hit it, he grabbed on for dear life. In desperation, he called for help. "Is anyone up there?" A man in a white robe appeared above him. He said, "I'll help you, my friend." "Great!" the man said, "Who are you?" "I'm the Lord. I can help you. Let go of the limb, and you'll be saved." Hanging from the limb the man looked down into the canyon below and said, "Are you crazy?!" "Not at all. I'm the Lord. Trust me. Let go of the limb, and you'll be saved." The man thought for a moment and called out, "Is anyone else up there?"

When things are going our way, it's easy to live by faith. But when the wheels fall off, it's tempting to look for something more tangible to hang on to, and we try to take matters into our own hands. King Ahaz and the people of Judah were surrounded by forces that threatened to destroy them, and, contrary to conventional wisdom, Isaiah said "*Stand firm in your faith.*" God is faithful and will stand with us and give us the strength to persevere. Sadly, King Ahaz wouldn't listen. Turns out, he was not a man of faith at all, nor was he a strong leader. He let the world around him influence his thinking. He was motivated by power and politics. He didn't believe Isaiah, nor did he trust God.

Instead, he looked to false gods. When that didn't work, he appealed to the king of Assyria for help. He would've sold his soul to the Devil if he thought it would save him. Isaiah tried even more to persuade him to stay the course and trust in the Lord. He said, "*Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights*" (v. 11). Ahaz refused. On the surface, it sounds as if Ahaz was pious and didn't want to trouble the Almighty. But in

fact, he was faithless and didn't want to have anything to do with God at all. So, in a fit of anger, Isaiah turned to the king and said, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (God with us)."* Isaiah goes on to say, *"For before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste"* (Isaiah 7:14&16)

We're not told who the young woman was, and it really doesn't matter. Isaiah's point was that, in a relatively short time—before the child reached puberty—Syria and Israel would be deserted and the Assyrian army would go on to attack Judah, as well. Historians say that the Assyrian Conquest was completed in 722 B.C. The child Isaiah was talking about would've been about thirteen years old. But here's the point: The child-sign was a message, not that the people of Judah would be spared from the wrath of the Assyrian army, but that God would be with them and strengthen them in their defeat and through their hardships to recover and return to a life of faith.

As for the coming of the promised Messiah, there was little likelihood he would come anytime soon. It was a distant fantasy. And yet, there were those who remembered Isaiah's prophecy and how, in the days of King Ahaz, God had given a sign of his faithfulness and love. If we turn to Matthew chapter one, we will see that Isaiah's words still mattered 700 years later: *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about... "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us").'"*

So, hold on to that thought and fast-forward to the 1st Century A.D. The people of Israel were living under Roman occupation. True, they weren't slaves, as they had once been in Egypt, but they weren't free, either. There were the greedy tax collectors, who squeezed as many shekels from them as he could; plus, there were the Roman soldiers, who were quick to put down any uprising or show of independence. They were free to practice their religion if it didn't interfere with their civic duties. In addition, they could observe the Sabbath and gather in their synagogues and make pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices

in the Temple. For Matthew and the early church, the birth of Jesus was the clear sign that amid this broken and fallen world God was still at work giving birth to his new creation.

At Christmas a good blender is a popular gift. Although, husbands, I'd strongly advise against giving one to your wife for Christmas. It might just disrupt your happy home. We put foods and liquids in a blender and in a minute or so the items are blended into one substance—indistinguishable from each other. At Christmas, God sent the world a blender. In Jesus, God and man, divinity and humanity, were so perfectly and mysteriously blended that nothing can separate the human and divine natures of Christ Jesus. He is fully human and fully God; perfectly blended into one incarnate personality—the God man. “*Immanuel*” was the sign that spoke to Matthew and the early church. Just as God had promised to be with his people in the face of the Assyrian assault, so God promised to be with his people in the days of the Roman occupation of Israel; not to overthrow the Romans or to challenge their authority; but to exert a force far greater—the force of faith in the sovereignty of God and the power of love and self-sacrifice that changes lives, revealed to us in the person of Christ.

Now, fast-forward once more, because the promise is just as real for us today as for early Christians who first heard Matthew's gospel. *God is with us*, here and now. He has come in the person of Messiah Jesus to *redeem* us from our sinful nature, to *restore* us to righteousness, and to *reconcile* us to himself.

This is what I hope you will take home today. As you honor Christ as Lord and Savior, and as you learn his teachings and follow his example of humility and sacrifice, may each of you be born again to a life of peace, hope, joy, and faith—and begin to taste the first fruits of eternal life. Then, you'll want to sing with the saints and angels, “*Glory to the newborn King: peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!*”

God bless this simple witness to his word. Amen.