

For the past three Sunday mornings we’ve heard the prophecy of Isaiah. He told us of signs that will alert us to the coming of the Lord.

- Three Sundays ago, Isaiah said, *“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore”* (Isaiah 2:4).
- Two Sundays ago, he said, *“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”* (Isaiah 11:6).
- Last Sunday, he said, *“They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”* (Isaiah 35:10).
- Today we have heard Isaiah say, *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel”* (7:14).

Most of us have heard this verse almost every Christmas since we 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 these prophecies—they seem to fit the Christmas story so well. But he’s not necessarily referencing the futuristic story of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus. What he wanted to communicate was the story of the coming of the Messiah.

To be fair to Isaiah we’re going to have to step back in time. The year is 735 B.C. There are three small tribal states—Syria (otherwise, 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 nation of Assyria, the superpower of Isaiah’s time. 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 would fight together to defend themselves.

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. So, King Ahaz refused to join the coalition, and this really upset the kings of Syria and Israel so that *they attacked Judah*. This is where our story for today picks up. Isaiah writes: *“When Ahaz son of Jotham...was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram (Syria) and Pekah the son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.”* (7:1) The Syrian and Israelite armies weren’t strong enough to breach the walls of Jerusalem. Fortunately, the people of Jerusalem had stockpiled grain and, as long as their water supply wasn’t cut off, they would make it. But the clock was ticking. How long could they hold out? Isaiah says that *“the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind”* (7:2). They were terrified.

One day, King Ahaz went up to the Pool of Siloam to check the life-sustaining water supply. At the same time, the Lord spoke to Isaiah and told him to find the king and tell him not to worry: *Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—[they] have plotted your ruin...Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “‘It will not take*

*place, it will not happen...If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all”* (7:4-9) Isaiah found the king and advised him to trust God and be patient. The siege would be short-lived. Besides, God had promised that a descendent of David would always sit on the throne of Judah. But it wasn't easy for Ahaz to believe it.

It was like the story of the tourist who went to the Grand Canyon. He 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?” he cried. Just then, a man in a white robe appeared above him. He looked down at the man and said, “I’ll help you, my friend.” “Great!” he said, “But who are you? The man replied, “I’m the Lord. I’m here to help you. Just let go of the limb, and you’ll be saved.” The man hanging from the limb looked down at the huge chasm below and said, “Let go of the limb? Are you crazy?!” The other man replied, “Not at all. I’m the Lord. Trust me. Let go of the limb, and you’ll be saved.” The man thought a moment and then yelled back, “Is anyone else up there?”

When things are going our way, it's easy to live by faith. But when things go wrong, as so often they do, it's tempting to look for something more tangible and concrete to hang on to. Sadly, King Ahaz didn't listen to Isaiah. Turns out he was not a man of faith, nor was he a strong leader. In times of crisis, he let the world around him completely influence his thinking. He didn't believe Isaiah and he wasn't about to trust in the Lord for their deliverance. Instead, he looked to the false gods of Baal. Tragically, Scripture tells us that, at one point, he even sacrificed his own son as a burnt offering to assuage the anger of the gods (little g). (2 Kings 16:5)

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 all the more to persuade him to stay the course and trust the Lord. He said, “*Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.*” But Ahaz said, “*I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test*” (7:11-12). On the surface that sounds pretty pious, as though Ahaz didn't want to trouble the Almighty. But in fact, he was a faithless man and didn't want to have anything to do with God. 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...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).

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 move south to attack Judah, and the land of Judah would be reduced to rubble. History records the Assyrian Conquest was completed by 722 B.C.

The point is: The future of Judah looked bleak; yet, in the face of certain annihilation, Isaiah offered hope. He 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*” (v. 14). God had something to **give** the terrified nation. God would **give** them the hope to endure and the courage to recover and the will to return to a life of faith.

Fast-forward to the 1st Century AD. The words of Isaiah are echoed in Matthew chapter 1: “*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”*” (Matthew 1:22-23). It was this sign that spoke to Matthew and the early church—that, just as God had promised to be with his people in the face of the Assyrian conquest, so God promised to be with his people in the days of the Roman occupation; and he’s with us in the midst of the sad and sinful world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That’s the promise that is just as real today as it was in Isaiah’s day and in Matthew’s day. God is with us—here and now. He has come in the person of Jesus to redeem us from our sinful selves and restore us to righteousness and reconcile us to himself. God has something he wants to **give** us.

Dave McAdams is a youth pastor, baseball coach, and owner with his wife of a coffee house in Oak Grove, Oregon. He is also dying of cancer. Last Wednesday, the owner of a nearby coffee shop closed her store for a day and ran theirs. “I knew that I had to do something to help them keep their business afloat so that Tina could be with Dave,” said Pixie Adams, owner of Moonlight Coffeehouse. “So, I decided to take over their shop and throw all of the support I could through my business and my community their way.” There is, of course, someone able to help us with all our problems in whatever way is best for us. *Because God gave so freely, there is giving for us to do.*

Jason Soroski played Linus in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* back in the 1960’s when public schools still had Christmas pageants. He memorized Luke 2 to recite on stage and says the Scripture has been hidden in his heart ever since. “Linus, of course, is most associated with his ever-present security blanket. Throughout the story of *Peanuts*, Lucy, Snoopy, Sally and others all work to no avail to separate Linus from his blanket. He simply refuses to give it up.”

Soroski says, “When Linus shares *what Christmas is all about*, he drops his security blanket. I am convinced that was intentional. At the specific moment he drops his blanket, he utters the words, “fear not.” Looking at it now, it’s pretty clear what Charles Schultz was saying. It’s so simple it’s brilliant. The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears.”

When God **gave** us his Son, the angel announced, “*Do not be afraid*” (Luke 2:10). His greatest gift is the gift of himself. His teachings, his example of humility, his sacrifice are all essential gifts, but the gift of his holy presence means we do not have to be afraid—of anything. Because Jesus came, we have witnessed the generosity and grace of God in ways we could never imagine. “*For God so loved the world that he gave...*”

What an indescribable gift! *Immanuel*—God with us. Amen.

(Thanks to Philip McLarty for sermon ideas)