

Brian C. Yount
Trinity Presbyterian Church
December 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25
Isaiah 7:1-2, 10-17; 8:5-10

“God With Us”

The main point of this sermon is that God’s presence is a presence of blessing and salvation when we faithfully trust, like Joseph, in God’s redemptive work in the world.

Difficult Situation

In my house growing up, as far back as I can remember, there were always stacks of a certain political magazine. And every month the cover of each magazine had a funny, cartoonish rendering of someone. And usually, especially as a child, I didn’t really understand the bigger message. I would just laugh at the funny pictures. And I think it was then I knew I wanted to be a Political Science Major in college.

I say all that because if political magazines and political cartoons existed in the 8th century BC I imagine King Ahaz would have been the target of many political cartoonists.

King Ahaz was the king of Judah – the southern kingdom of the Jewish people. He was king when the kingdom of Israel was split between a northern and southern kingdom. And as king of Judah, King Ahaz was in a difficult spot. And the difficult situation was this: the king of Aram (Syria) and the king of Israel, the northern Jewish kingdom, formed an alliance against the region’s real superpower, Assyria. They were seeking to overthrow Ahaz and setup a puppet king who would fall into line with Aram and Israel against Assyria. That’s why verse 2 tells us, “When the house of David (that’s Ahaz) heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.” Can’t you picture Ahaz cowering under his desk, surrounded by advisers and consultants and bureaucrats, none of whom really had any idea what to do?

Ahaz was in a bind. His hold on the throne was weak. He knew he didn’t have the firepower to stand up against the two kings to his north. He was desperate for help. And so, the question for Ahaz, the question that would determine everything, would come down to where Ahaz would look for help. Where would he turn? On whom would he cast all his hope and trust? And to answer that question, Ahaz needed a prophet. His only hope was to receive a word from the LORD.

Assurance from God

Now, we didn’t read this part of the story, but in verse 4 Isaiah reports to Ahaz the LORD’s strategic policy. Here’s what Isaiah tells Ahaz to do: “Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands.” Those two

“two smoldering stumps of firebrands” are the king of Aram and the king of Israel. Ahaz wasn’t to fear, because the LORD was going to bring an end to those kings in due time and through the LORD’s way.

But I’m sure in Ahaz’s eyes and in the eyes of all of Ahaz’s advisors, no one would have characterized those two kings as “smoldering stumps of firebrands.” But you see, everything in this world looks far more threatening and menacing and important when we aren’t looking with the eyes of faith. Without faith we don’t see clearly. We don’t walk in a straight path.

You see, Isaiah didn’t bring Ahaz the latest and greatest strategy. He didn’t offer Ahaz a surefire way to success. Isaiah was a prophet, which meant he represented an ancient wisdom – a wisdom our world quickly pushes aside and forgets. Isaiah reminded Ahaz of an eternal truth when he said, “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” (v. 9).

It’s important to note that Isaiah wasn’t asking Ahaz to stand blindly in faith. No. Instead, he was asking Ahaz to stand firmly in what the LORD had spoken through him. And I think the great difficulty for Ahaz was that God’s word didn’t match *his* perception of reality. For him, faith wasn’t the way to victory. Ahaz, in all his authority and power as king, wouldn’t yield to the authority and power of God’s Word. He wanted to do as kings do and rule according to his way and follow the counsel of his own words. He wanted nothing to do with faith and trust and relying upon the LORD.

And you know, we are often very much like Ahaz. We put too much confidence in our own perception of reality. We prize and esteem our cultural moment too much. We have too great a trust in our own understanding of things and have too great a love for our own authority and power. Isn’t it true that we’re more comfortable standing in our own words than in God’s?

Rejecting the Sign

That was the cause of Ahaz’s downfall. He wouldn’t budge. He wouldn’t give up being the king who made all the calls. That’s why he doesn’t ask for a sign from the LORD. The LORD directed Isaiah to have Ahaz ask for a sign that would confirm to Ahaz and everyone else that the LORD alone would take care of Judah’s enemies. But in verse 12 Ahaz is basically saying he doesn’t care about the sign, because he doesn’t care about the LORD. He doesn’t want to bother with faith. He prefers being left alone to handle things as he chooses. He’s not going to stand in faith but on his own two feet.

And so, while Ahaz lived in the 8th century BC he was a very modern man, wasn’t he? He trusted in himself. He was the king and who was the LORD or Isaiah or anyone else for that matter to tell the king what to do.

Ahaz thought that by rejecting the sign he could put all this God business behind him and get on with the real work. He thought that by dismissing Isaiah he could dismiss God from his world. But Isaiah knew it doesn’t work like that. That’s why in verse 14 Isaiah says, “the LORD himself will give you a sign.” He’s saying to Ahaz whether you like it or not you are going to face the LORD. You see, God is always relevant, and it’s not up to us to make God relevant. We aren’t

fitting God into our lives but asking God to make us fit for His life. But Ahaz wasn't interested in any of that.

The Sign God Gives Ahaz

And so, what is Isaiah telling Ahaz here about this woman who will give birth to a child who will be called Immanuel? This is obviously the verse that Matthew picks up and inserts in his passage about the virgin conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. But we need to ask, what does this prophecy mean in its original context? In other words, how was the sign fulfilled in Ahaz's day?

Now, very briefly, we need to understand that prophecies, like this one, often function or work in layered ways. Here's what I mean: A prophecy can have an immediate meaning in its original context. And so, there are sometimes multiple "fulfillments" to a prophecy. And that's what's going on here. There's a fulfillment in Isaiah's day, but it's partial. The greater fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy comes in the birth of Jesus. So, what we're looking at is how this prophecy was fulfilled in its original setting.

Notice what Isaiah says in verse 16. He says that "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." Remember, those were the kings Ahaz feared. Those are the kings of Aram and Israel, the two smoldering stumps of firebrands, and the prophecy is that by the time this child is of an age to distinguish good from bad, the LORD will bring an end to the two kings who threatened Ahaz and the people of Judah. So, in the immediate context, the child is possibly Isaiah's son or the future king of Judah, Hezekiah. And the prophecy is that by the time this child reaches an age to distinguish right from wrong, Ahaz's enemies are going to be defeated.

That's good news for Ahaz, isn't it? But listen to verse 17 again. "The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria." You see, Ahaz had been relying on Assyria for deliverance. He sought Assyria's aid instead of heeding the LORD's counsel to do nothing. And so, what happened was that Assyria brought an end to Ahaz's enemies, but Assyria also delivered the blow of God's judgment against Ahaz and the house of Judah. That's why Isaiah likens Assyria to "the mighty flood waters of the River." Ahaz couldn't control Assyria. He couldn't keep Assyria where he wanted. He wanted to choose his own path and deliver himself, but it didn't work according to Ahaz's plans.

And so, when we put it together, we see that for Ahaz God was "Immanuel." This child was the sign that God was present with Ahaz even though Ahaz wanted to put God out of the picture. God was present with Ahaz to judge his rejection to stand in faith.

Joseph and The Child Named Immanuel

Ahaz was a man who turned away from God. He rejected God's way of deliverance. He didn't want to rely upon or trust God's Word. He was a self-sufficient man who thought he could do just fine on his own. And so, God was present with him as his judge.

But you see, not everyone follows the way of Ahaz. Just look at Joseph. Imagine his difficult situation. The woman who was to be his wife was pregnant, and he was not the father. As a righteous man, he was morally obligated to divorce Mary, and yet he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace. He was torn. He wrestled with himself. He too was in a bind.

And then, a word from God broke into his life, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (vv. 20-21).

Joseph had two ways before him. He could have turned down the Ahaz path and rejected the child who truly was Immanuel. Instead, he stood firm in faith and welcomed God's gift of deliverance. Unlike Ahaz, Joseph was blessed by God's presence, because he responded in trust.

But notice what Joseph's trust and obedience meant for him. He took Mary as his wife. And when the child was born, he named him Jesus – a sign that Joseph legally adopted Jesus. And those two acts most likely came with a social cost to Joseph. To many, it was probably a scandal that Joseph went ahead with the marriage and raised the child he didn't father as his own. Those two decisions altered Joseph's life.

Accepting the Cost

We see in Joseph that a life of faithfulness comes with a cost. It means accepting we aren't the authority over our own lives. It means giving up the right to determine for ourselves what is true. And maybe the greatest cost to pay and the biggest hit to our pride is to admit we need to be saved from our sins.

I think many go the way of Ahaz, the way of rejecting God, because they don't see the severity of their situation. Like Ahaz, they believe they can manage without God and figure out on their own how to get by. But the message of the incarnation is that we can't manage without God. We can't deliver ourselves and get to where we need to be. And so, God came to us. He became like us in every way (yet without sin), so he could save and redeem every fallen and broken piece of us. That's the real scandal. That's the scandal of grace. As Augustine said, "Man's maker was made man that the Bread might be hungry, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired from the journey; that Strength might be made weak, that Life might die."

And so, again at this Christmas, why can you stand in faith and trust this God? Why can we be like Joseph and take the risks that come with a life of faith? Because we never have to pay the ultimate cost for our sins. That cost fell to Jesus. And he paid it in full. He delivered us body and soul by taking on himself the judgment of our Ahaz-like rebellion.

And so, this Christmas and the coming year, may the Spirit make us more and more like Joseph and Mary, who submitted their plans and emotions and wills to God. That's the way to know and experience and receive Immanuel's blessings. Stand firm in your faith and know God is with you.

Amen.

Bibliography

Brown, Jeannine K. *Matthew: Teach the Text Commentary Series*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015.

Dorian, Daniel M., Philip Graham Ryken, Richard D. Philips. *The Incarnation in the Gospels*. Reformed Expository Commentary. Series Editors: Richard D. Philips and Philip Graham Ryken. Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2008.

Motyer, Alec J. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1993.

New Bible Dictionary. Third Edition. Edited by I. Howard Marshall, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer and D.J. Wiseman. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996.

Osborne, Grant R. *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*. General Editor: Clinton E. Arnold. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Webb, Barry G. *The Message of Isaiah*. The Bible Speaks Today. Series Editor: J.A. Motyer. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996.