

A Sign  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
December 22, 2013

**Isaiah 7:10-16**

<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> 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.

**Matthew 1:18-25**

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is a familiar story, the one told in Matthew, re-told from the one in Isaiah: Look, a woman will bear a child and he shall be called Emmanuel, God with us. We know well how God enters into this story. Even very young children can tell you for whom we wait this Christmas, and every Christmas, perhaps after they’ve first said Santa but they **do** know. We know how God enters in. Will you be surprised if I tell you these two readings are only partly about how God enters in? These stories are about how we, people, enter in, too.

Ahaz, who is King Ahaz, king of the southern kingdom of Judah was afraid. He was afraid because Israel, the northern kingdom, also known as Ephraim, and aligned with Aram, was trying to take over Judah in order to help them remain free from the Assyrian Empire. In Ahaz’ fear, God offers him reassurance, to the point of volunteering a sign. And not just any sign – a sign so big only God could be behind it – a sign as deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But fearful Ahaz declines God’s offer with the explanation, which is really an excuse, that he does not want to test the Lord. Let me pause here – we have heard “Do not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” So what we hear from Ahaz doesn’t seem out

of line. But this situation is different than us asking God to find us a parking spot or make clear the path we are to take with a spotlight, literal or figurative. In these moments we are calling upon God and ask God to prove God's self. But Ahaz? God says, "tell me what you need from me to trust me" and Ahaz says, in essence, "no, thank you."

Ahaz had fear and God presented him with a sign he didn't wish to take. Biblical scholars suggest this is because Ahaz did not trust God. I would add more specifically that Ahaz did not trust that God could help him out of his fearful situation, in other words, that God could bring good out of what seemed inevitably bad. Do you see where we enter in? Have we had fears and been unable to imagine or accept or trust that God could be in those fearful and dark places? Have we thought to ourselves that we'd brought fear and darkness upon ourselves, and were undeserving of God's love and forgiveness? Or were we just convinced that we could do it ourselves?

This story in Isaiah is about how God will do things greater than we can imagine, deeper than Sheol, as high as the heavens, so great that God will be among us, with us. This story is also about how we push back against God's being with us. Ahaz's fear is our fear. And though God may not ask you to ask for a sign, God is still sending us signs every day, not just Christmas Day. And these signs are often unassuming, one might even say mundane, commonplace, ordinary, not out of place, as familiar as a pregnant woman.

So what of our reading from Matthew, which opens with said pregnant woman? Of course, the story is about Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, and we know this because our reading begins: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." And the story is about Joseph. Unlike Ahaz who experienced fear and then a sign, Joseph experienced a sign and then fear (for why else would an angel say "Do not be afraid."): He learned that the woman to whom he was betrothed, which in those days was as good as married, just not living under the same roof, was pregnant and he knew the child was not his. Joseph was a good man. This sign changed his hopes and expectations. Because he was a good man, he was planning to quietly let go of those hopes and expectations, distancing himself graciously from the future he could no longer have with Mary.

But God came through an angel and said, "Wait! Don't give up, don't walk away because things don't appear the way you expected them to. Your part has changed but you still have a part." Joseph didn't know what to make of the sign when he saw it. He thought he knew how he should respond. God came to him and told him otherwise. And he listened. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife...; and he named him Jesus."

We enter in, like Joseph, when we see signs and understand them to mean our plans have changed and so we move on to what we think we must do next. We can also be like Joseph, though, and

be open to hearing and fulfilling God's will for us each day. Granted, it would be easier if God's will was communicated to us nightly, in dreams of angels. Trusting in God's love and working to discern God's will is not always an easy path. But because of the gift – the hope – of this Christmas season, we seek to do just that.

These stories, like the whole of the Bible, are about how both God comes to us in relationship and how we come to God. We hear these stories, we read them, we reflect on them so we can know and be assured that others have come before us in ways like our own. We may be fearful, doubtful, untrusting like Ahaz. We may be uncertain like Joseph, or maybe overly certain in our plans. We hear these stories, we read them, we reflect on them so we can know and be assured, too, that God's promise is this – to be with us. In our fear and our uncertainty, God is with us. And God is always offering signs, not because we ask for them but because God wants us to know God is with us. The signs will likely be in God's time and in God's way – after all, who would ask for a pregnant woman as a sign – but they will be there, always to assure us that God is with us. And so, we pray that we might have eyes to see the signs: O Lord, let us walk in your light. Amen.