

Here's Your Sign  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee  
12/22/13

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 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. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 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.

Matt. 1:18-25

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. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"  
which means, "God is with us."

24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## HERE'S YOUR SIGN

Comedian Bill Engvall has a routine in which he states that some people do such crazy things and ask such foolish questions that they should have to wear a warning sign.

We have warning signs for other dangers.

Why not have a warning sign to hang around some people that says, "I'm stupid?"

He then goes on to tell several stories in which a person asks a stupid question. The question is given a sarcastic answer followed by the statement: "Here's your sign!"

Down through the years God's people have said and done a lot of stupid things. (And when I say God's people I also include us in that group.)

God would have been well within His rights to answer our silly questions with sarcasm and then say, "Here's your sign."

But, God didn't do that.

God gave us a different kind of sign.

We don't get a sign that says, "I'm stupid."

We don't get a sign of derision.

Instead, we get a sign that we don't deserve.

We get a sign of eternal hope.

That's the story of Scripture.

And here's your sign as delivered by our Scripture lessons for today.

## AHAZ

It begins long ago with a frightened and ineffective King. Judah's King Ahaz was in trouble. Israel had joined forces with Syria and these two countries were threatening to invade Jerusalem.

The invasion seemed imminent. King Ahaz and his people trembled like trees shaking in the wind. (Isaiah 7:2) The Lord spoke to this shaky King through his prophet Isaiah.

The prophet told the King, “Pick a sign. Any sign.”

And the fearful King chattered,  
“Oh noooo... I can’t do that. You know what the Bible says. Don’t put the Lord to the test.”

(Now King Ahaz wasn’t really worried about putting the Lord to the test. He was afraid of what the Lord might ask him to do. Ahaz was all about his personal safety first, last and always. Like most politicians he wanted to take a poll before he made any move.)

Besides, following God is a dangerous business.  
Just ask the prophets.

And so Ahaz tried to hide his lack of courage under the guise of piety.  
(By the way, there are lots of people who try to do the same thing even today.)

What a pathetic excuse for a king he was.  
In frustration Isaiah said,

“You’re wearing out everyone, including God. If you don’t have the faith to ask for a sign I’ll give you one.”

EMMANUEL

“Look, this young woman is about to bear a son, and do you know what that Son will be called? He will be called Emmanuel, which means God is with us. God is with us in this child.”

And how will they know that God is with them in this child?

By the time this child is weaned Syria and Israel will no longer be a problem. They will be defeated. Judah will be saved.

Here’s your sign.

Those words were written for people who lived long ago in the days of King Ahaz.

The sign proved to be true. God did save his people from this military danger.

That might be mildly interesting, but, why do we still talk about this sign? Why does this sign still have meaning for us today? Why is this ancient sign also our sign?

It's because the story continues.

In Matthew's retelling of Isaiah's prophecy we see how the Word still becomes flesh and dwells among us. Matthew has a lot in common with Isaiah. God is still with us. The baby is still called Emmanuel.

But, there is a difference.

This baby is born not of a young woman but of a virgin.

This child is not just the Messiah.  
This child is the Son of God.

Here's your sign.

## A LIVING WORD

But, like Ahaz we are reluctant to hear. The sign seems strange to us.

Some of us may wonder, "Is it wrong for Matthew to interpret these words in such a new way so many years later?"

I would say, no. It's not wrong for Matthew to find Jesus in Isaiah's prophecy, even though the name Jesus isn't in the text.

Matthew believed (as do we) that God's Word is living and active. Each generation enters God's story with expectation and hope. We learn in new and unexpected ways how God is still with us.

My favorite example of this is how African slaves in America heard stories of God delivering the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt. They saw themselves in that story in a way that their slave masters did not.

“Let my people go” was not just a cry made by Moses on behalf of his people. It was a cry made by God on behalf of slaves in America.

Each new generation reads Scripture with longing and need. Each new generation reads Scripture with expectation and hope.

That’s what Advent is all about.  
In Advent we once again hear God saying,  
“Here’s your sign.”

## GOD’S DREAM

But, we must not make the mistake of divorcing the message from its context. When Hitler’s army invaded Russia the German soldiers wore belt buckles inscribed with the words, “God with us.”

It is far too easy to turn “God is with us” into a call to defeat our enemies. It’s far too easy to turn “God is with us” into a meaningless motto that baptizes what we already believe.

In the Bible God is with us in a specific way. God is with us in the birth of a child. God is with us not in the destruction of life but in the creation of life.

And God’s sign is not always easy to receive.

Surely King Ahaz was not pleased with the sign of a child. He needed more soldiers, not some crazy prophecy about a child being born with a weird name.

In the same way poor Joseph did not see God’s sign as good news, at least at first. His wife was pregnant before they got married. He took it as a sign that she had been unfaithful.

It took a visit from an angel in a dream before Joseph could see things differently.

Maybe that's the key. Before we can accept our sign we have to be touched by God's dream, God's gracious plan for the world.

Have you ever noticed how many times the Word of God comes to God's people in dreams? Over seventy times in the Bible the Word of God comes through a dream.

And it is God's dream that changes Joseph. It is God's dream that allows Joseph to believe in something new.

The child is not an embarrassment or a reason for change. The child is a sign of God's presence. His name shall be Jesus. He shall be the one who saves us from our sin. He will be the one who saves us from our foolish and thoughtless ways."

## HISTORY AND MYTH

Frederick Buechner has written:

"If the Christmas tale is true, it is the chief of all truths. What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the Child may be born again in us - in our needing, in our longing for him."

Speaking of dashing hopes, have you heard that the "history" channel is going to celebrate the Christmas season?

They're going to do it with a special on things in the Bible that are not true. One person says in the commercial, "The Bible might be a divine book but it has human fingerprints all over it."

And in the promo for this special our passage for today is mentioned.

As we read, the sign given King Ahaz by the prophet is this. A "young woman" shall bear a son and name him Immanuel.

Now in the Greek version of the Old Testament the word properly translated "young woman" in the Hebrew is now translated "virgin." The angel in Joseph's dream uses this Greek translation. And so, the virgin birth is seen as a kind of proof that in Jesus God is with us.

But, if this is a mistranslation of the Hebrew, then (according to the history channel “expert”) a major doctrine in the Christian faith, the doctrine of the virgin birth, is based on a mistranslation.

Merry Christmas from the history channel!

These are the same folks who bring you stories of the Yeti, Area 51, alien abductions and the complete works of Nostradamus. Glad they could take history so seriously when it came to the Bible.

(Actually the Hebrew word can be translated “young woman” as it is done by the NRSV. But, it can also be translated “virgin.” I hate to inject facts into this discussion of history, but it’s a job that somebody has to do.)

But, no matter how we translate this one word, the importance of this sign does not depend upon that one word.

The importance of this sign is based upon the title that the child is given. Young women conceive and bear children all the time. But, this particular young woman names her son Immanuel.

Despite evidence to the contrary, she proclaims through the name of her son that God is with us. Even though the forces of darkness surround us, God is with us in the birth of this child.

God redefines the world and what is possible through the birth of this child.

The great theologian Karl Barth once had a debate with the biblical scholar Rudolph Bultman. (Bultman, by the way believed that most of what was in the Bible was myth and not historically accurate.)

Barth countered by saying that what the world calls history we call “myth.” And what the world tends to dismiss as “myth” we Christians delight in calling history.

In other words Christians believe that in the final analysis the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (history) will not define the world. The Providence of God will define the world. The most important fact of history is this: God is with us.

Much to his surprise Joseph learned that the God who hung the planets and flung the stars in their courses is the one who comes to us and is present with us in this child

And God's child is still surprising us. Each year we read the same story

You'll find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

God still comes in such an unexpected and lowly way.

Here's your sign.

### THE CHILD

The context of the sign still matters.

The world insists on worshipping a vengeful God, a God who crushes our enemies. But, when we see the little child as a sign of God with us, the picture changes.

We receive the child with joy and hope for the future.

The child draws us together in love. The child demands our attention.

But, the child cannot harm us. The child depends upon us to grow and thrive. We can only receive the child that God has sent us.

God's Word, God Presence comes to us in this helpless child.

I think that says a lot about God and how God operates in the world.

We know what we deserve.

We know that we have sinned and fall short.

We know that God has a right to be angry with us.

Like Ahaz we wear God out with our faithless ways. And we wear each other out as well.

The comedian is right. We should wear warning signs around our necks ... all of us should.



But, despite our evil and unjust ways God still comes to us. Even though we are a fickle and fearful people, the steadfast love of the Lord endures.

We didn't seek this little Messiah, and quite frankly we didn't want Him. Yet here we are again, peering down into those big eyes and the smile that melts our heart.

And we know. God is with us.

Here's your sign.

There's a fourth stanza to the hymn, O Come O Come Emmanuel.

Regrettably our hymnal leaves it out. But, I would like for us to sing it as a response to God's Word.

It's printed in your bulletin.

Sing with with me as Mark plays, and pay particular attention to the words.

“O come dear child of Mary, come,  
God's Word made flesh within our earthly home;  
Love stir within the womb of night,  
Revenge and hatred put to flight.

Rejoice, rejoice!  
Take heart and do not fear,  
God's chosen one, Immanuel, draws near.”

Here's your sign.

Amen.