

*“A Sign from God”*

**Isaiah 7:10-17**

Perhaps some of you remember from the news a few years ago that a Christian group bought a bunch of billboards throughout the country. On them, they put different sayings from God, such as “Meet at my place before the game.” I also remember seeing a billboard in Gary as I drove home from college. It was an advertisement for the diocese of Gary, and it read “Consider the priesthood: If you’re waiting for a sign from God, this is it.”

We all look for signs from God. We look for signs that we are in the right career, that we are marrying the right person, that we’re making the right decision about any number of choices that face us each day. We also look for signs from God to prove that He exists, or that he cares for us. When we reach the end of our rope, when troubles seem to overwhelm us, we ask God for a sign. Where is the healing? Where is the rescue? Where is the end of my troubles?

Sometimes we can be jealous of the people we read about in the Bible. They get to hear from God. They don’t have to stumble around and wonder what to do. They get signs, in dreams or burning bushes or other ways. But sometimes the signs aren’t what they want. Sometimes the signs are not signs of hope and joy, but of judgment.

That’s what we see when we look at this familiar Old Testament lesson. Because of how Matthew uses it in the passage from his Gospel we heard read this morning, we often just see this passage, this prophecy, as a sign of the coming Messiah, a sign of God’s mighty work of salvation, a good sign from God. We see it as

predicting Jesus’ birth. But there’s more going on than that.

First, we have to know who is talking here. Isaiah the prophet we know, but his ministry spans four kings of Judah. King Ahaz, though, is not one of the good ones. Ahaz was one of the worst kings ever to ascend David’s throne. Not only did he worship false gods and offer sacrifices to idols, but Ahaz even sacrificed some of his own sons to pagan gods. There was bad, and then there was Ahaz bad.

And so when Ahaz, king of the southern kingdom of Judah, hears that the kings of Syria and of the northern kingdom of Israel are massing forces against him, he doesn’t turn to God. Or at least, he doesn’t just turn to God. He consults oracles and idols. And he doesn’t just look for help from gods. He planned to send for help from the king of Assyria, the rising superpower in the ancient Near East.

But even if Ahaz doesn’t care for God, God still cares for Ahaz and the people of Judah. So God sends Isaiah to Ahaz, with the promise that the plans of Syria and Israel would not stand or come to pass (Isaiah 7:7). To prove it, God has Isaiah tell Ahaz to ask him for a sign, a way to confirm his Word was true. Ahaz refused. “I shall not ask, and I shall not put God to the test,” said Ahaz (Isaiah 7:12).

Now, at first glance, this seems like a good thing. After all, we read in Deuteronomy, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” though we’re probably more familiar with it from when Jesus quotes it to rebuke the devil during the temptation in the wilderness. But Ahaz wasn’t refusing the sign so he didn’t put

God to the test. He didn't want anything from God. He didn't want a sign from God. He wanted to go his own way, forge his own path, without God getting in his way.

Ahaz's response leaves Isaiah furious. He roared at Ahaz, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the LORD Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:13-14). (Immanuel means, "God with us.") Before the boy would be old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the kings of Syria and Israel would be gone. Good news, right? Wrong! Isaiah continued: "The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house days which have not come since the day when Ephraim went away from Judah—the king of Assyria." Syria and Israel would be off the scene, conquered by Assyria. But Assyria wouldn't stop there. The Assyrians would turn their eyes towards Judah and Ahaz. Thus the sign of Immanuel, the proof that God was with Ahaz, would be for him a sign of judgment and destruction. This is what the sign of Immanuel means for us: salvation. The angel told Joseph that Jesus came to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). God became a human being in the flesh of Jesus Christ so he could save us from our sins. Jesus did this for you when he died on the cross, bearing your sins in his body to the point of death. He came to suffer and die for you, enduring God's judgment and fierce anger, so that you wouldn't have to. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). The sign of Immanuel is salvation for all who believe in

Jesus and the forgiveness he won for us on the cross.

That is the thing about signs: how you read them depends on who you are. For Ahaz, the sign of Immanuel was a sign of judgment. For Matthew, Joseph, Mary, you, and me, the sign of Immanuel is a sign of salvation. So for those who believe in Christ and his forgiveness, God's signs are always signs of grace and mercy. But for those who do not believe, God's signs are always signs of judgment. Who you are affects how you read the signs.

For us, the sign of Immanuel is a sign of hope. Yet now we remember that God's sign of judgment is not the end. Even Ahaz, who was a bad king, is still listed when Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy that goes from Abraham to Joseph, who had the dream and listened to the angel and was the earthly father of the Son of God. God's judgment comes not for its own sake, but to call to repentance.

We still wait for a sign from God. What will the sign of Immanuel mean to you when Christ returns or calls you home? Will the fact that "God is with us" be a threat or a promise? Will Immanuel come to punish or to rescue you? How you read the sign depends on who you are. I leave you with these words from the Book of Revelation: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." This is the sign of Immanuel: God with us, God for us, God forgiving us in the flesh of Jesus Christ forever.

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