

THREATS AND PROMISES

Advent 4 Year A

Is 7:10-16; Ps 80:1-7,17-19; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:18-25

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Have you ever been in a situation that became so serious that there appeared to be no way out? You tried your best, but there seemed to be no hope for your despair. Perhaps it's a financial hardship, a medical crisis, a family adversity, a relationship breakdown. You may have turned to a friend, a family member, your employer or doctor or—or maybe you turned to God. All you needed was a word of hope to lift you from your desperation so you could move forward again.

Times like that take a lot of struggling to work your way out of. Tough times can really test our mettle—they try our patience and our courage and demand our concentration—so that whatever the solution is, it can be found.

What do you do when adversity strikes and it seems like there is no solution? What do you do when your dream for the future suddenly ends, with no satisfactory explanation?

This is the situation we find in our readings this morning, both from the book of Isaiah, and the story of Ahaz, and the story of Joseph in Matthew's account of the gospel.

Both of these men were faced with what seemed at the time to be insurmountable problems—problems that would affect them and the people around them for a very long time to come. That is, however, where the similarities cease. Faced with the solution to their problems (by God, no less) Ahaz responded faithlessly, Joseph with faith. Both were given a promise, which, for one, Ahaz, became a threat. It's telling that the footnote in the HarperCollins Study Bible to vs. 17 says, "Whether the verse is a promise or a threat to Judah is ambiguous." Makes you wonder if you can be threatened by a promise? (Schuette)

Both of them had been given the same sign—and in both instances the sign was a baby. Matthew, in writing about Joseph's plight, in fact, references the sign given to Ahaz, thus drawing the connection between the two.

So, let's break it down just a bit.

King Ahaz—the king in today's prophecy from Isaiah—is a man standing in great fear. To understand why, we have to go back a few verses to get the context of this passage. Two of Ahaz's nearest enemies have united against him: the Northern Kingdom of Israel (a Jewish nation that had, in previous days, been part of a united kingdom with Judah), and Aram (or Damascus), a non-Jewish nation. Ahaz fears the bloodshed and destruction that war inevitably brings.

The kings of Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel had come together to attack Jerusalem. They were unsuccessful, but Ahaz appealed to Tiglath-Pilezer, the King of Assyria, for help. Assyria then attacked and captured Damascus.

Ahaz then went to Damascus to meet the king of Assyria. While there he was impressed by a pagan altar he saw. Subsequently he had the bronze altar in the Temple in Jerusalem moved and a pagan altar erected in its place. He used the pagan altar for offerings and sacrifices, but still sought divine guidance at the bronze altar (vv 10-16). He had become, in effect, a polytheist.

So, the situation for Judah was not good. But it was made considerably worse by an unbelieving king who was acting out of fear.

You and I, today, can understand Ahaz's fear. I'm sure that many of us have been in some kind of position like that where we have stood among enemies, where no help or hope seems to be found.

Our own enemies are probably not political adversaries who threaten to take away our land. In our context, perhaps we might name our enemies as consumer culture railing against us on one side, telling us and our children that we're never good enough because we don't have that one special shining product we need to make our lives perfect—a never ending source of despair. Or, we might see our enemies in our culture of violence, which glorifies killing in movies, social media, and video games, and which also belittles or ignores actual violence and death by all kinds of means. And, we might be fearful of these things—how they form us and our children, and what messages they send our neighbours.

God hears Ahaz's fear, just like he hears all our fears. And so, God himself asks the prophet Isaiah to go to Ahaz and do what prophets do best in times of terror, to offer a word of hope to the embattled king. In this case, God says, "do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands...."—referring to the two nations that were against him. They might be smoldering but they're not a full-fledged fire—they won't engulf you. (Isaiah 7:1-9)

Even more than offering words of hope, God goes one better in offering his words of comfort, and that is the point at which today's reading begins. Ask me for a sign, any sign at all, he says (11). God offers divine carte blanche to the king. You can choose something from the depths of Sheol to the heights of heaven—all the mysteries of heaven and earth. God does for Ahaz what we all hope God might do for us in our own places of fear. God offers some physical present sign of hope—hope that is broad and wide and deep and more than capable of feeling even the most fearful of hearts.

Yet ... Ahaz refuses, using what might seem to be a pious excuse: "I will not put the Lord to the test." Christians might be reminded, in fact, of Jesus' temptations, and how Jesus responds to Satan: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

But Ahaz, as we have discovered, is not a pious man—and his words do not appease God. In fact, they make God very angry. By not doing what God has asked, Ahaz is in fact demonstrating his disbelief in God and God's ability to save. Ahaz's words and actions are familiar to many of us. In the face of fear, especially in the midst of real problems, tragedies, and violence, how often do we resort to disbelief as our answer? "If God really existed, God wouldn't have allowed... (fill in the blank, yourself)"

Although Ahaz does not take God up on the offer, God gives him a sign anyway—whether he wants one or not. All the mysteries of heaven and earth are in fact conveyed in these words: "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." (14)

The words seem to refer to something fairly immediate. The Hebrew word for "virgin" may refer to any young woman of marriageable age. "But," the prophet goes on, "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" (v. 16). And yet, even here there is a sense of unfulfillment in the words. Fulfillment means that something has been made complete. While there was an immediate reference in Isaiah 7.14, it hadn't all happened just then. It is something for which hope and faith must be exercised.

Over in The gospel of Matthew, we find Joseph, son of Jacob, was pledged to be married to the young woman, Mary. However, a problem arose—a problem that troubled Joseph to no end—and all the arrangements had come unstuck. Mary, he discovers is pregnant. Not particularly unusual, we think to ourselves, these days. But, in those days, betrothal lasted a full year before the marriage and the rules were very specific—no sexual contact during this time. That hadn't happened, and yet Mary was pregnant.

So, Mary must have been unfaithful with some other man. Joseph could come to no other conclusion. Mary's story of the visit of an angel, of the power of the Holy Spirit, of a holy child who would be called the Son of God... was a bit of a stretch—it just didn't quite add up. He would have to terminate the betrothal. Yet because he actually loved Mary and didn't want to expose her to public disgrace, he decided he would do it quietly.

As he was turning all of this over in his mind, he had a dream in which an angel of the Lord spoke to him. Matthew writes, "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. She will bear a

son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Mt. 1:20,21).

The gospel writer adds that “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (14) and then quoted from the prophet Isaiah: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.” At last the future component of the sign given to King Ahaz was fully coming to pass. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (24-25)

So, let’s look at the story of Joseph and compare it with that of Ahaz. To Ahaz, the sign of the promise became, for him, a threat. As the years spun out past Ahaz’s failed reign, past the Assyrian, Persian, and Roman takeovers of Israel, surely there were others like Ahaz who despaired at the oppression, and political and economic turmoil of their world and disbelieved in God, too. Actions, as they say, speak louder than words—and where was God? Or, if one wanted to pretend belief in God, it was easy enough to offer pious nothings that sounded good but didn’t mean all that much—especially in a world that equated political power with God’s own power and economic wealth with God’s own good fortune. We see the same today with global leaders who profess faith in God, yet their own actions show unbelief.

To Joseph, on the other hand, who responded to God in faith and trust, the promise of God became a source of hope, not only for Israel, but for all humankind: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

It’s Christmas time again and every year at this time, Christians sing the ancient carol, “O come, O come Emmanuel”—just like we did this morning. It’s a song that originated about 1,400 years ago and we still sing it today. It is the ultimate pull of every human heart, to feel the presence of God’s love. We sing it in hope; we act on it when we, like Joseph, live from the dream of its fulfillment. We fulfill it when we treat every person we meet as a child, for it’s precisely in the lives of children of God, whether they are infants or elders, whether they are young or old, male or female, that God is with us, today, tomorrow, and forever.

At this time, we remember the coming of Emmanuel, God with us. He came for you. He came for me. He came to save us from our sins. Welcome him! Receive him! And rejoice with great joy!

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.