

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 18, 2016

Prayer of the Day: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the burden of our sins and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel. Alleluia! (Matthew 1:23)

Sermon Text: Isaiah 7:10-14

Isaiah 7:10-14

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ “Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”

¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.”

¹³ Then Isaiah said, “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? ¹⁴ 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.

Have you ever wished that God would give a sign that he was with you? It might be one the more popular wishes among believers. “I wish God would give a sign to either move to a new city or stay in my current city.” “I wish God would reveal when I would get a job and what kind of job it would be!” “I wish I had some assurance, some knowledge that this trouble will work out for my good.” If only God would—what? ... nudge you? ... illuminate a path? ... pull out a movie projector and play your future? ... speak to you? If God only did those things, then you could know for sure, without fear, without anxiety that God is actually with you, right?

Many look for signs that God is with them. Some claim to have new messages from God; others search for God in stories of the supernatural. Many seek proof that God is on their side. Because, at times, you may so alone in a world of pain, choices, and surprises. You may feel without guidance and direction that life will be pain-free.

But God gives you a sign. A great, powerful act that reaches up to the highest heavens and penetrates the deepest depths. Nothing is impossible for God. He summarizes that unshakeable truth in the little name: **IMMANUEL: GOD IS WITH US!** *to end self-reliance and to instill trust.*

God proves that truth as you read: **Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz.** That’s right, the LORD had come once already. You see, Ahaz is king over Judah. As king he rejects an alliance with two other nations. Now, foreign relations grow tense. Those two kings went from terms of peace to a declaration of war. One-hundred-and-twenty thousand (120,000) of Ahaz’ soldiers are slaughtered ([2 Chronicles 28:6](#)). Two-hundred thousand (200,000)

women and children are captured as plunder ([28:8](#)). Enemies gnaw on the borders of Judah ([28:17-18](#)).

Right when this international crisis breaks out, there's God— with his people. He pours out one assurance after another. *"Keep calm!"*— Judah will not be obliterated. *"Don't be afraid!"*—your nation will remain. *"Don't lose heart!"*—I'm right here. *"It will not take place, it will not happen"* ([Isaiah 7:4,7](#)). God literally unwrap the future and shows a standing nation!

Ahaz is not worried. No, not because he actually took God's promise to heart. Instead, he had already fired off a letter to the powerhouse nation of Assyria— the greatest, fiercest empire of its day. He begs: *"I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me"* ([2 Kings 16:7](#)). He loots the temple of God, using the silver and gold to bribe the Assyrian king ([2 Kings 16:8-9](#)). Then, he *offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought 'Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me'* ([2 Chronicles 28:22-23](#)). And then he locks the doors to the temple, sets up little shrines on every street corner, and urges his citizens to plead for help from other gods ([28:24-25](#)).

You know what? Ahaz actually gets a divine answer. No, not from false gods. Those are just blocks of stone and wood. The one true God sends Isaiah with a special invitation: **"Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."** Ahaz could ask for absolutely anything! God could unleash ten powerful plagues proving he is on Judah's side. A priest could offer a sacrifice and God could consume it. Yet, quicker than people return their Christmas gifts on December 26th, Ahaz answers: **"I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."**

Yet, God wants that! To "test" God means "to trust he will do what he promised." He urges us to "test" him, that is, to trust that he is going to do what he says he can do.

So, do you "test" God? When you argue with your family— and feelings are hurt and they stop talking to you— are you turning to God? Do you hear him instruct: "[You be the first one to] *Forgive one another, just as in Christ God forgave you?*" ([Ephesians 4:32](#)). Or are you stubbornly waiting for them to crawl and beg for your mercy? When you get the diagnosis you never wanted to hear, do you take a deep breath and instantly recall God's gentle assurance: *"Your times are in my hands?"* ([Psalm 31:15](#)). Or do you go through the mental checklist of how you will save your life? When your marriage feels strained— where do you look for guidance? Our society preaches: "Do what makes you feel good! Split up! Leave! You— be happy!" But our God points at your heart (not to your spouse) and commands: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved you so much that he died for you; wives, love your husbands just as believers love Christ, its head" ([Ephesians 5:22-23](#)).

The devil does such a tremendous job of tempting us to think that God is the problem to the challenges we face in life. That he really gets in the way of making things better. If the devil can just get you to believe that, then you will stop turning to God. You will grow self-reliant. You will eventually be like Ahaz and say: *"I don't want your help."*

You know, so much fighting, so many divorces, so much fear is not God's fault. The fault rests squarely on us— if we are not turning to God's promises, grabbing them by faith, and reminding ourselves they will never be broken.

If it sounds unbelievable that God keeps his Word, then look at the sign he gives. **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.** God literally keeps this promise; it's right there in his name. "Im-" means "*with.*" "Manu-" means "*us.*" "El-" means "*God.*" **IMMANUEL!** the Hebrew way of saying: "**GOD IS WITH US!**" *to end our self-reliance and to instill trust.*

Even though Ahaz doesn't want a sign, God rolls up his sleeves and sends one anyways. He promises: *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* ([Isaiah 7:15](#)). Sure enough, the king of Assyria drives Ahaz' enemies out of Judah ([2 Kings 16:9](#)). A decade later, he crushes those kings for good ([2 Kings 17:1-23](#)).

That is only part of the sign. The greater sign is the boy himself. You know the story. *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn* ([Luke 2:1-7](#)). That Son of the virgin Mary is unlike any other child the world has ever seen. God creates a miraculous sign. Jesus is born without a human father—just like you confess (in the Apostle's Creed): *I believe in Jesus Christ... conceived by the Holy Spirit.*" Because Jesus is born in this manner, he is without sin.

God enters your world so that he can literally be with you! In Jesus you find no reason to be afraid. Every marriage-question, every death-question, every-relationship question he shares sprouts from the written Word of God. Every act of healing is meant *to instill trust* in God's mighty power. Never once does he rely on his own wisdom; he turns to the Word and clings to it throughout life.

He does not stop there. **GOD IS WITH YOU** as he puts down his life to set you free from eternal death. In such rich grace and mercy Jesus willingly takes your place in sin's judgment line. He actually is abandoned by God— getting what self-reliance really wants. He reaches to the depths of hell and proclaims his victory over the devil! He rises to exalt you to the highest heights of heaven—where **GOD WILL BE WITH YOU** for all eternity!

As if that is not enough, Jesus remains with you now. Maybe you have sighed: "I just wish God would just speak to me." I understand, we want to hear God's answer to specific problems we face. We want God to tell us "Yes" or "No" to purchase. We want God to tap us on the shoulder and say: "Go there!" We want God to come down and assure us: "Don't worry. Everything will be fine. I promise." When we don't hear an actual, audible voice of

God, we grow irritated. We look at the Bible and it just seems like another novel assigned for reading from our English Literature class.

But God has spoken. When Jesus speaks on earth, he is God speaking. When Jesus' disciples write down his words in the Bible, you are hearing God's Words— just like a diary. If you want to know someone's inner thoughts, you read their diary. So, if you want to know the thoughts of God, then read what Jesus has to say. Learn about God's expectations in marriage. See how God wants you to treat your parents, government, and spiritual leaders. See how you can forgive— even those who appear “unforgiveable.”

Then hear how **GOD IS WITH US** in baptism. Your God has saved you through the washing of rebirth and renewal ([Titus 3:5](#)). The water applied his name to your head and heart. There at the font, you get to see: **GOD IS WITH YOU** always!

When you walk up to the Lord's Table, Jesus use his real body and blood with the bread and wine and assures you: *I gave my body, I shed my blood for you. You are forgiven!*

If you want to know if **GOD IS WITH YOU**, then look to the tools he has given you. He speaks through his Word. He saves you in baptism. He attaches forgiveness, eternal life, and the strengthening of your faith.

Even Ahaz' gods could not save him. The one true God kept stripping away the nations surrounding Judah— until Judah was all that remained. Then, in one fell swoop, he unleashed an army to swarm over them and destroy their nation.

In the midst of complete annihilation, God is there. Through David's line God steps into the world through Mary. He enters for one purpose: *to end self-reliance*. Jesus has entered the world and has removed the burden of your sins! What joy you have in celebrating the One who sets us free for eternity!

What joy as *he instills trust* in your heart! Even when life seems to be ripping apart at the seams, take hold of God's promises. Cling to them. Put your mind at rest as you cross over the name of God's guarantee: **IMMANUEL: GOD IS WITH US!**