

Is. 7:10 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 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.

Our Scripture lessons for today tell us about two men who found themselves between a rock and a hard place. You know what I mean. It’s that catch 22 situation, a time when there is no right choice. No matter what we do it seems like we will lose.

AHAZ

In our Old Testament lesson, we hear the prophet Isaiah’s message to King Ahaz.

Ahaz ascended to the throne of Judah in 735 BC ... at the ripe old age of 20. A year later he faced a terrible dilemma.

Assyria, the dominant power in the region had forced smaller nations such as Syria and Israel to pay tribute. But, Syria and Israel decided to fight back. They formed a military alliance against the Assyrians, and they wanted young King Ahaz to join them.

Ahaz refused to join. He correctly judged that Assyria would be too great a foe. But, Syria and Israel would not take no for an answer. They began an invasion of Judah to replace King Ahaz with someone who would be more cooperative.

This inexperienced leader had few options. If he cooperated with Israel and Syria, the Assyrians would destroy his country. If he didn't cooperate with Israel and Syria, those countries would destroy his kingdom before the Assyrians got the chance.

It was a no win situation. The king truly was between a rock and a hard place.

JOSEPH

The same was true for Joseph in our New Testament lesson. Except his crisis was a very personal one.

Joseph's parents had arranged a marriage with a village girl named Mary. There was nothing unusual about that. Most marriages were arranged in those days. And for the past year Joseph and Mary had entered into the final phase of this arrangement, the year of betrothal.

Although Joseph and Mary did not live together as husband and wife, this was the time that they declared their intentions to the community in a more serious way. In fact, if the wedding was called off during this time it was necessary to get a formal divorce.

But, then Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant. What to do? The choices were not attractive.

First, he could divorce Mary publically for her assumed infidelity. According to a strict interpretation of Old Testament law, Mary could even have been stoned to death if Joseph made such a claim.

But, Joseph was a compassionate man. This first option was quickly rejected.

The second option was to go ahead with the marriage right away. This would have been tantamount to Joseph admitting that he was the father. This was not acceptable either. Joseph was a righteous man, and he didn't want anyone thinking that he had broken God's law.

So Joseph opted for a compromise. He would divorce Mary, but he would do it quietly. People would talk. But, at least justice would be tempered with mercy.

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was all he could do given the circumstances. After all he was between a rock and a hard place.

AHAZ'S COMPROMISE

Ahaz made a similar decision. When faced with the Assyrian devil and the deep blue sea of a threatening Syria and Israel, Ahaz chose the devil. He chose to make a pact with Assyria.

He knew it would mean paying heavy tribute, but what could he do? He had no choice.

It was then that the prophet Isaiah came to Ahaz with a word from the Lord. According to the prophet, his options were not as limited as he first believed.

Ahaz had failed to factor in the possibility of divine intervention.

God was going to deliver his people. And in order to prove this the prophet told Ahaz to ask for a sign. He said, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

JOSEPH'S DREAM

Joseph was given the same insight into his dilemma through a dream. The Scripture tells us that the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in that dream and brought that universal Christmas message, "Don't be afraid."

What Joseph thought was an occasion for fear was instead an occasion for wondrous hope. This child would not bring destruction. This child would bring salvation.

This child would not be just any child. His name would be Jesus, which means "He saves."

The angel told Joseph this would be the ultimate fulfillment of what the prophet told a frightened king long ago,

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

BIAS AGAINST THE DIVINE

That's the message of Christmas in a nutshell. God is with us.

The trouble is, we live in a world that does not believe that. We live in a world that is biased against the possibility of divine intervention.

When people in our society say, "Only God can help us now," it is not an expression of faith. It means, "I've tried everything and nothing works. I give up."

Not really believing in the possibility of a divine solution means that we are often tempted to compromise with the devils of this world when it seems like there is no good solution. We opt for that quiet divorce or the convenient alliance with a dictator whose human rights record is less than stellar.

We seem to think that even a bad solution is better than no solution at all. When push comes to shove we refuse to put the promises of God to the test.

We refuse to live with uncertainty, even for a little while.

ASK FOR A SIGN

In our Old Testament lesson the prophet insisted that Ahaz seek the divine option instead of the imperfect human compromise. Isaiah told Ahaz to ask for a sign ... any sign big or small.

But, Ahaz refused. Ahaz said, "I will not put the Lord to the test."

Now that sounds like a good answer, even a pious answer.

You may remember that Jesus also said something like this. The devil took Jesus to the highest point of the temple and suggested that he should jump to prove that he was the Messiah.

After all, the devil said, don't the Scriptures say that God will command the angels to protect you?

And Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, don't put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus and Ahaz were quoting the same Scripture.

And the Scripture is true. We shouldn't put God to the test. We shouldn't act like God is on call to give us the desires of our heart or to make us heroes in the sight of others.

OUR TEST

It is presumptuous to ask for a sign from the Lord, unless the Lord tells us to ask for a sign.

Sometimes God uses difficult situations as a means to increase our faith.

Sometimes we are asked to believe that security is not always found in military might. Sometimes we are asked to believe that broken relationships can be healed.

And we are given this sign, the sign of a newborn child.

That sign is still relevant today. You see the child written about long ago by the prophets, the child who was born to Mary long ago is still with us.

The child's name has not changed.

His name is still Jesus because he comes to save us from our sin. His name is still Emanuel because through the work of the Holy Spirit God's presence comes into our life even now.

In the dilemmas that face us today, God invites us to ask for a sign, to try out the promises of faith.

WEAK AND FRAGILE HOPE

We can piously refuse to ask for a sign. We can suggest that God doesn't operate like that anymore, that we have to be realistic.

But, that is the language of compromise. That is the language of doubt.

God invites us to surrender to hope instead of doubt. God invites us to emphasize faith instead of fear. God invites us to believe that in our weak and fragile world a child is born, a son is given.

And though the government is upon his shoulders, the government will not win. The powers that be are no match for the power of God's gentle salvation.

One commentator wrote, "Nothing is so helpless, so dependent, so fragile, so frail as a baby. I know of no other religion so bold as to admit the possibility of its God appearing in so vulnerable a form."

And yet it is the fragile, vulnerable nature of this sign that makes it so powerful.

An old man in a poor Italian village stood before the altar nativity scene and whispered with a toothless grin,

"The bambino, the bambino is poor, little, and outside ... like us."

I must admit that I am suspicious of the sentimentality surrounding the sweet baby Jesus that is such a part of our Christmas celebration. I find the sign given Ahaz and Joseph hard to accept.

What kind of sign is a child?

I find myself agreeing with the preacher who said we shouldn't sing Away in a Manger; we should sing Away with the manger. Let us spend our time thinking about the grown up Christ who had plenty to say about the kingdom of God.

But, there are times when I need this sign. There are times when I think there are no good choices, and I want to give up.

And at times like these the sign of the baby Jesus seems to be just what I need. In that sign we see our own vulnerability, and yet we also see the hope of God that can change lives forever.

ACCEPTING THE PROMISE

Unlike King Ahaz, Joseph was able to believe in the promise. The Scriptures tells us that when Joseph woke up he did what God commanded. He took Mary home as his wife.

Now Joseph didn't have to do that. After all it was just a dream. What proof did he have that this message really came from God?

He really didn't have proof.

But, Joseph decided to trust and obey. Joseph decided to do the best he could in a difficult situation and let God work out the details. Joseph was willing to embrace the mysterious ways of God.

Joseph accepted the sign of a child. Joseph believed that somehow God's purposes would be accomplished through his faithfulness to a pregnant wife.

A POWERFUL SYMBOL

Perhaps one reason Christmas captures the imagination of so many people is that the sign of a child is so powerful.

A fellow pastor told of his wife finally becoming pregnant. He wrote,

"The longed for dream became a reality.

Through the fall she became bigger, great with child as Matthew would have put it, and as the December days grew short and cold we watched this mystery of mysteries unfold.”

His wife was in the choir that year, and she said that she sometimes caught herself singing for the baby in her womb rather than for Mary’s baby.

And on Christmas Eve as she processed with the choir she knew that she was on the way to Bethlehem. When the lector spoke of Mary being “blessed among women” she felt Gabriel was speaking to her.

The pastor wrote,

“That December we found that there is no better time to be waiting for a baby than Advent, when the whole world waits for a baby.”

Last Sunday our congregation celebrated the birth of that special child with a pageant put on by our own children. The story is very familiar, but somehow when we include our own children the story becomes personal.

Have you ever noticed how a baby is always the life of every party?

Everyone wants to hold it. Serious adults make foolish faces and sounds in an attempt to make the child smile.

Despite its weakness a baby is also powerful.

New life speaks to us of hope too deep for words.

A baby can change things like no one else.

CHANGED BY A BABY

There was a man who kept his marriage vows rather loosely.

He thought little about the past and had not the slightest interest in the future. He spent the first years of his marriage mainly on the road in his quest for the almighty dollar.

“But,” he said, “One night I got turned around, the night I walked into the hospital room and held my little baby in my arms for the first time.

I realized that she was part of me even if she was better than I deserved. I said to myself, ‘You’re going to have to stop your foolishness and start living like somebody because she’s somebody.’”

The birth of a baby called forth the best in this man's humanity. Birth caused this man to be reborn.

In a greater way, that's what happened to all of us with the birth of Jesus. The sign of a child is still the best sign we can have when we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place.

The minister's wife was right in a way. The Christmas story is about us, not just those of us who wait for a child to be born but for all of us who know that we need a Savior.

This Christmas many of us find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. And in the midst of our distress we are blessed once again with a sign of hope.

The message comes us just as it came to people long ago, "unto us a child is born."

His name is Jesus.

He saves us from our sins.
He brings the presence of God to earth.
He is a sign of the kingdom that comes.

Amen.