

## “Deliverance for Christmas”

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Scriptures: Isaiah 7:10–17; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1–7; Matthew 1:18–25

You know that you are close with someone when you can effectively communicate with them non-verbally. A friendship, a marriage, a relationship with a mentor , these can all be occasions where a simple nod of the head can mean, “Stop beating around the bush and tell me what you are actually thinking,” or a wide-eyed stare can mean, “Can we please leave this social function?” If you can non-verbally communicate with someone in your life, cherish that relationship!

Some signs are a bit more symbolic: flowers on a birthday or anniversary. A hand written note, a small gift, those signs of good will and the desire for connection that keep relationships of all kinds alive. When I feel like I want to connect with my Dad, I text him about baseball. Neither of us are going to be MLB executives anytime soon, but it gets us talking.

Sometimes, when things aren't going our way, we hold out for a sign. A sign that we need to keep this job, or a sign that we need to quit it. A sign that we should hold on. A sign that we should let go. Sometimes we even get bold enough to ask for these signs from God himself. “Lord, just give me a sign.”

If there was ever any group of people who needed a sign, it was the people of Judah. We are familiar with the words we heard from the prophet Isaiah this morning, words that echo forward to the manger and One who was born of a virgin, but we

are less familiar with what was going on in Isaiah's day that brought those words forth. Turn with me to Isaiah chapter seven.

The first two verses lay the groundwork:

"In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."<sup>1</sup>

Here is what is happening: God's people have divided into two kingdoms: the 10 northern tribes of Israel, and the two southern tribes of Judah. The Northern tribes, led by their king Pekah, have partnered with the King of Syria to come in battle against the people of Judah. They are set to lay siege to the holy city of Jerusalem. And the text says that the Judean king Ahaz along with his people is shaking like trees shake in the wind. They are terrified.

And so God sends Isaiah to king Ahaz with bad news and with good news. The bad news. Syria and your estranged siblings in Israel are here for you, they want to replace you as king with someone who will enter into their little alliance, toe the line, and consolidate power so they can be a force to be reckoned with in the region.<sup>2</sup> But then, the good news. Hear what God says to Ahaz through Isaiah just before our

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<sup>1</sup> Isa 7:1-2.

<sup>2</sup> See the article "Ahaz" in the *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible* for the idea that the alliance was looking to put a ruler in place who would join their alliance.

passage for today begins: “It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass.” Syria and Israel have bad plans for Judah. God will not let those plans come to fruition.

And then the prophet seems to want to drive the point home: “ask God for a sign.” Ahaz does what he feels is the most pious thing and says, “oh no I couldn’t do that, I don’t want to test God.” But Isaiah gives the sign anyway. A young woman in the kingdom, perhaps in the royal court there with Ahaz and Isaiah, who does not yet have children, will conceive a son, a son whose name will be Immanuel, “God is with us.” And by the time that this boy is old enough to know right from wrong, the kingdoms of Syria and Israel will no longer be of concern. The places they were inhabiting will become desert wastes. And they, who were seeking to conquer for themselves, will become the conquered at the hands of an even greater power, the Assyrian Empire. That is the way of things for the never-ending feedback loop of those who seek earthly power. There is always a bigger fish.

It won’t be easy in the meantime, though. In our reading, the prophet mentions “curds and honey,” in the description of this boy named Immanuel. That is the sort of thing the boy will eat. It is likely that this is a reference to the fact that with the armies of Israel and Syria outside of Jerusalem’s walls, they were limited to food that they could cultivate within the city walls.<sup>3</sup> There is not much you can eat in the way of wheat or vegetables when the fields around your city are occupied by enemy forces. You have to stick with the curds you can make from the cow that lives just outside your house.

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<sup>3</sup> *IVP Background Commentary on the Old Testament*, Isa 7:16

But for those that hang on to hope, those that follow the directive of verse 9, to be firm in their faith, they will see the enemies of Judah be defeated. Assyria will come and the threat will be no more. And that is indeed what eventually happens. Israel and Syria, caught up in the cycle of one-upmanship of empire building, get consumed by the biggest kid on the block - Assyria. Deliverance will come.

But this is not the final deliverance. Judah would fall into error and to oppression once again and we will leave off some of the reasons for that for later, but what is made clear by the history of God's people is that an even greater deliverance than that which God placed in the hands of Assyria was needed.

And so, when St. Matthew was penning his gospel story and when it came time to share the story of the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth, he chooses to share the story he had heard of Joseph's dream, a word of encouragement to a confused man whose betrothed had given him an unexpected message. Yes she had been faithful to their upcoming marriage and also yes, she was pregnant. And to make sense of this, Matthew makes sure we as the readers hear again the words of Isaiah about a young woman conceiving and that child being a sign that God is with us.

As it turns out, our human need for a Savior is greater than just one time of crisis, greater than the immediate context of Isaiah 7. We needed a filling up and a flowing over of those words that would tell not only a besieged Judah, but the entire world that God is indeed with us. The forces of Syria and Israel are not the only armies waiting to pounce upon our lives. Syria and Israel are one thing; sin, death, and Satan, are quite another. The defeat of the latter requires a greater deliverance than that of the former. Isaiah's words were fulfilled in his own day: the boy he was talking

about grew up and saw the end of the forces that would oppress his people. But what that boy did not see was the ultimate fulfillment of the prophet's words, that indeed a virgin did conceive and this boy would not be a mere witness to God's saving work, he would be that work himself.

And so the question we have to consider for ourselves today, as we celebrate the first arrival of our King in just a couple of days, is this: How do we respond?

What we need to avoid is the post-Christmas crash, that sinking feeling we get when it sets in that Christmas is not going to be perfect. We have all experienced it in one way or another. When we were young, maybe it was because Santa didn't quite check all the items off our list. Ponies don't fit well in very many backyards it turns out. As we grew, maybe our hopes for some grand gesture of reconciliation or healing at Christmas didn't quite turn out as we would have liked, or perhaps we were not able to provide for those we love everything we would have liked, and so what we would have called Christmas joy just a couple of days before melts away into something worse than what preceded the Christmas season.

In a world of perpetual crisis, this is a real danger for us as we celebrate the coming of our Lord. Unless he comes again in great glory, the world will not be fixed on December 26th. Crisis upon crisis will continue to rage.

It is interesting to me how each generation has a claim on having things worse than those who have come before or after them. Someone my age would make the case this way. When we were supposed to still be children, the terrorist attacks of September 11th stole our innocence from us. When we were entering the workforce,

the financial crisis of 2008 put not only work, but home ownership out of reach for us. When we did finally get on our feet in our 30s, a global pandemic wiped everything we had built away. There is some merit to this argument, and yet, we hear nothing of World Wars or Great Depressions. Each generation can make a strong case for having the worst luck. Why? Because there will always be struggle, crisis, and pain until our Lord comes to us for the final time. And if we are not careful, we can lose the joy of Christmas as quickly as it arrived.

So how do we stay faithful in the in-between? Be Joseph, not Ahaz. Now we get to the part of the story where Ahaz gets it wrong. You can read about King Ahaz, the king who received Isaiah's word of hope and deliverance, in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28. Ahaz was not a worthy recipient of God's favor. By the time he hears Isaiah's word of God's deliverance, he was already an idolater, and had even sacrificed his own son in a pagan sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> And yet God is gracious to him in giving him a word of hope when his city is surrounded by the Israelites and Syrians. "Assyria will come and release you from oppression." This is a watershed moment and what Ahaz does next can reset the course of his life on a better path. But Ahaz fails the test. Instead of choosing to wait for God's timing, Ahaz takes things into his own hands, latching onto the idea of salvation not by God, but by the instrument God has chosen, Assyria. Ahaz sends word to Assyria, asking for an alliance and deliverance, the same sort of alliance that Israel and Syria had, the sort of thing that started this whole mess.<sup>5</sup> Ahaz even goes himself to Assyria and has a copy of the pagan altar there made in God's Temple in Jerusalem. He built pagan altars throughout God's land.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 16:1-4

<sup>5</sup> 2 Kings 16:7

<sup>6</sup> 2 Chronicles 28:25

his desperation, Ahaz squandered the lifeline of God's deliverance in favor of acting on his own strength, caving to his personal idolatry on the way.

We are distressed about many things. Like Ahaz, whose political situation was quite dire - an army outside your city gates is in fact a real problem, many of our distresses are justified. The family strife, the unsure financial situation, the evil that we see in our world. But when we refuse to wait on the Lord and take things into our own hands, we walk a dangerous road that is ripe for us falling for those old idols, of wealth, power, and control. Don't be like Ahaz.

Be like Joseph. Joseph didn't have a siege army surrounding his house, but you can probably imagine his distress, how the life he thought he was making for himself was over. He was betrothed to be married. The families were a good match, he liked Mary and was excited to start a life with her. Then the news. An unexpected pregnancy. Joseph knew he had kept the Law, and Mary claimed she had too. Joseph had his doubts, and so he too was going to take matters into his own hands, but quietly, because he was a kind man. There was no need to publicly shame Mary, but he was not going to stand and be wronged. A quiet divorce was the right path, the just path. Then Joseph had his word from the Lord. God didn't send a prophet like Isaiah this time, this news was important enough to send an angel. "Joseph, Mary is telling the truth. Remember how God told Ahaz that a young woman conceiving was good news? This time it's even better than that."

Consider what Joseph could have done in that situation. He still could have chosen to leave. To surrender to the idol of his own reputation. But Joseph was a good man.

God had chosen him for a reason. He decided to wait and let God's timing play out. And he got to be a protector and provider for the home that would save the world.

We like Ahaz, like Joseph, have received good news. What we do next is up to us. Will we take the reigns ourselves? Will we fall back on our old patterns and idols? Or will we wait on the Lord and have faith? Back in Isaiah 7, when Isaiah first tells Ahaz that God will deliver his people from the surrounding armies, he tells him in verse 9 what it is going to take to get through: "If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all."<sup>7</sup> Ahaz was not firm in his trust in God and his best efforts to save his people made things worse. Joseph maintained his faith in spite of what he saw, and got a front seat to God's redemptive work for the whole world.

I am not going to pretend to know all of the challenges you face this morning. The names of the armies that stand outside our personal city gates are only really known to us. Like Ahaz, your fears and concerns may be real and justified. But do not lose sight of the one who can actually help you. Don't step out of his deliverance by doing things your own way. It is true, you may have to subsist on curds and honey for a while because the fields that were yours are now occupied by an invading force, but stay firm in faith. The deliverance of the manger is coming. And he, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, has come to make things right. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 7:9b