



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas Isaiah 7-9 & St. Matthew 1:18-25 Fr. William Klock

December 29, 2024

The Prophet Isaiah made his way along the dusty track across the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem. His young son walked beside him as they followed the Siloam Channel that carried water from an ancient rock-cut pool into the city. That's where the Lord had told Isaiah he would meet the King, Ahaz. He was to go there to declare the word of the Lord to the King and he was to take his young son with him, whom the Lord had told him to name Shear-jashub. The name means "a remnant shall return". A way of saying that God would not let his people be obliterated by their enemies. Isaiah's son was, himself, part of the prophetic message. And there was the King. Ahaz was looking over the great stones, carved and set a thousand years before by the Canaanites who had founded Jerusalem. It was the city's water supply and Isaiah could see the concern on the King's face. Those were *dark* days. Seven-hundred-and-thirty years before Jesus was born. The Assyrian Empire to the east was the great power of the day and claimed the small western powers like Judah, Israel, and Syria as its own. The King of Israel, in particular, was in a tough spot. To pay the tribute he owed to the Assyrians he levied an enormous tax on the rich. Rich people don't like being heavily taxed and they were on the verge of revolt. At the moment, the King of Assyria was busy fighting in the north, so the King of Israel made an alliance with the King of Syria and the two of them approached Ahaz. They wanted Judah to join their alliance. Together, maybe, they could throw off the heavy Assyrian yoke. They'd done it a hundred years before. Together, maybe, they could do it again.

But Ahaz was afraid. He knew what would happen if they lost. And so he refused to join the alliance. But Israel and Syria wouldn't take no for an answer. They laid siege to Jerusalem. If Ahaz wouldn't join up with them, they would defeat him and put their own puppet king on the throne of Judah. And so, that day, King Ahaz was out surveying Jerusalem's water supply. Would it survive the siege? He was worried. And that's where Isaiah and Shear-jashub met him. Isaiah was afraid, too. Ahaz had a reputation. Both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell us that he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Instead of following in the footsteps of his "father" David, he walked in the ways of the evil kings of Israel. He was a weak, fearful, and vacillating king. Instead of trusting the Lord to deal with Israel and Syria, he aligned himself with Assyria. A few years later, after visiting the temples of the Assyrian capital, he would remove various furnishings from the temple in Jerusalem in order to make room for a pagan altar like the ones he'd seen there. He was a wicked king who would lead God's people into idolatry. Confronting a king with the word of the Lord is never an easy thing to do, but confronting an ungodly king with the word of the Lord was even more difficult. Think of John the Baptist, seven hundred years later, landing in Herod's prison for declaring the word of the Lord. But unlike the King who trusted in horses and chariots and in foreign gods and kings more than he trusted in the Lord, Isaiah's faith was unwavering. And he met the King and, nervous as he surely was, he declared the word of the Lord with power and authority. "Do not be afraid". This alliance of Israel and Syria and their siege, the Lord said: "It shall not stand". The Lord was urging the king to trust in him. He also said, through Isaiah, "If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all."

And to guarantee his promise to the King, the Lord gave Ahaz a sign. Through Isaiah he said to him:

**Behold, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows**

**how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 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.**

What the Lord was saying to Ahaz was, "Look. Trust in me. Don't trust in horses, don't trust in chariots, don't trust in pagan kings and pagan gods. Trust in me and I will take care of you. I am your God and you are my people. I promised David that his descendants would sit on Judah's throne forever and neither Israel, nor Syria, nor the Assyrians will undermine my promise." The Lord had Isaiah mention a young woman, a maiden. We don't know who this girl was, but it had to be someone known to the king. Maybe the queen or one of the princesses in the court. Whoever it was, Isaiah tells the king that she's going to have a child and he is to be named Immanuel. Immanuel means "God is with us". And the Lord tells the king that by the time this child is eating solid food, by the time he's old enough to know the difference between good and evil, he, the Lord himself, will put an end to the threat posed by the kings of Israel and Syria. Again: Don't trust in horses. Don't trust in chariots. Don't trust in pagan kings and pagan gods. Trust in the Lord and walk with him. He is with you.

But that wasn't the end of it. The Lord later sent Isaiah back to the king. This time a woman referred to as "the prophetess"—probably Isaiah's wife—had borne a son named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens". The Lord's message was again for Ahaz to trust in him. Before this child was old enough to say the words "father" and "mother" the Lord would deal with the threat of Israel and Syria. Again, don't trust in pagan kings and pagan gods, trust in the Lord. "God is with us," declared Isaiah. "The Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem."

Now, is the Lord faithful? Does he do what he promises? Of course. What the

Lord promised was exactly what happened. In a short time the king of Assyria crushed Syria and Israel. The northern Jewish kingdom was destroyed and the people scattered. The Lord delivered the people of Judah. Ahaz, not surprisingly being the wicked king he was, made an alliance with Assyria anyway and brought the worship of the Assyrian gods to Israel. But his son, Hezekiah, saw what the Lord had done. Hezekiah, when he succeeded his father, trusted the Lord and spent his reign trying to undo the evil his father had done. When the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem thirty years later and the enemy soldiers taunted the Judahites to give up on their God and the enemy commander delivered a letter demanding Hezekiah's surrender, Hezekiah took that letter to the temple and knelt in prayer before the Lord. He entrusted himself and his people to the God he knew to be faithful. And that night the Lord unleashed a plague on the Assyrian army that wiped them out.

More often than not, when the New Testament writers wanted to recall the Lord's faithfulness or the Lord's deliverance, they drew on the story of the Exodus. It makes sense. The Exodus was *the* great story of the Lord's faithfulness to his promises and of his deliverance of his people. It set the pattern. But it wasn't the only story in Israel's history that puts the Lord's faithfulness and deliverance on display. As St. Matthew tells us about the birth of Jesus in today's Gospel, he quotes from Isaiah's prophesy to Ahaz in order to put Jesus in perspective. Remember that Matthew was writing his Gospel for the benefit of his fellow Jews and so he regularly recalls their scriptures and their story to show that what the God of Israel was doing in Jesus was part of their story—in fact, that what God was doing in and through Jesus was the *culmination* of the story of Israel.

And so Matthew reminds the people that when Jesus was born, his people were living in dark days—not all that unlike the dark days of Isaiah and Ahaz. They'd returned from exile in Babylon, but they were still ruled by foreign, pagan kings. It was like the exile had

never really ended. Most notably, the Lord's presence had never returned to the temple. God was absent and the people longed for his return, not just because he would set everything to rights, but so that they could again live in his presence. And so it should be no wonder that Matthew pulls this story about the baby, Immanuel, "*God with us*", that he pulls it out from Israel's past and into the present day.

So Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Joseph. I used to read that genealogy as a kid, stumbling through all the names, and wondered why it was so important. In part, Matthew wanted to show the kingly lineage of Joseph. Even though he wasn't an important man, he was a descendant of Abraham and of David. But at least as important as that is the way Matthew selectively structures his genealogy. As he says in verse 17: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the Exile, and fourteen generations from the Exile to the Messiah. Seven symbolised completion, so six times seven and now, as the seventh seven is about to begin, Jesus is born—the climax of the whole list, the one whom Israel had awaited for two thousand years. As Paul puts it in our Epistle from Galatians: "When the *fullness of time had come*, God sent forth his Son."

The Old Testament, Israel's scriptures, over and over and over and over—above everything else—highlights the faithfulness of God to his promises. There are all sorts of themes that run through the Old Testament, but above them all, pulling them all together, is the faithfulness of God. Humans are fickle—the story also makes that clear—but God is faithful and worthy of our trust, worthy of our worship, worthy of our loyalty and allegiance. And, after setting out Joseph's divinely orchestrated genealogy, Matthew launches into the story itself in verse 18:

**This was how the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place. His mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph; but before they came together she turned out to be pregnant—by the Holy**

**Spirit. Joseph, her husband-to-be—was an upright man. He didn't want to make a public example of her, so he decided to set the marriage aside privately.**

It's not hard to imagine the disappointment, the embarrassment, even the shame that Joseph felt. "It's not another man," Mary told him. "I'm pregnant by the Holy Spirit. That's what the angel told me. I don't understand how it can be, but he told me that this child is the Messiah."

Joseph knew where babies come from. This was going to bring shame on him and so, Matthew says, Joseph made plans to quietly separate from Mary—to break off the engagement. Hopefully he could distance himself from the whole fiasco, save some face, move on with life, and maybe find someone more respectable to marry.

But then the angel appeared to Joseph. "Joseph, son of David!" the angel greeted him. Joseph was a descendant of King David, but so were a lot of people. This was the first time anyone had ever addressed Joseph as if he were a prince. But the angel's making a point: Joseph is part of the royal family—the family from which the Messiah would come. "Joseph, don't be afraid to follow through with this marriage to Mary. She wasn't lying when she told you she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She's not crazy. A miracle has really happened. She's going to have a son. And, listen, when he's born, you are to name him 'Jesus'. Why? Because he's the one who will save his people from their sins."

If we're paying really close attention, we might notice that the way Matthew tells the story parallels the story of Isaiah going to meet King Ahaz—to declare the word of the Lord. Matthew reminds us that Joseph is a descendant of that same royal family. "Don't be afraid" he declares. A child is about to be born and you're going to name him Jesus. You're going to name him "Yahweh saves". Maybe we miss the parallels. As we say, "Explain it to me

like I'm five years old." And so Matthew makes it very plain in verse 22:

**All this happened so that what the Lord said through the prophet might be fulfilled: "Behold, the virgin is pregnant, and will have a son, and they shall give him the name Immanuel," which means, in translation, "God with us".**

He makes this connection explicitly clear, because as best we can tell, no one before Matthew had ever thought of Isaiah's prophecy being fulfilled in the birth of the coming Messiah. No one had ever made that connection, because everyone knew that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the days of King Ahaz. Everyone knew that. It was actually Matthew, knowing what Isaiah had said and the history that surrounded that prophecy, it was Matthew who saw there a sort of prefiguring of Jesus. Paul wasn't the only Jew who, when confronted with the risen Jesus, went back and rethought all of Israel's story with him in mind. Matthew did it too.

When people said to Matthew, "You fool! Don't you know where babies come from? The Lord doesn't work this way!" Matthew pointed back to Isaiah and said, "You wanna bet? The Lord *does* work this way. In fact, he's been working this way all through the history of our people. Our story and all the little details that God has been working out were pointing to this, like little lights along a tunnel, and now those little lights have led us out in the blinding light of the sun—except the light is God and those little glimpses he's given of himself have finally led us to this place where—in Jesus—we see his glory blazing forth in all its brightness. I can imagine Matthew, talking with his fellow Jews, and pointing them back to the characters and the stories they knew so well and showing how they were little lights, little bits of God's glory revealed, leading them through the darkness to the glorious day of Jesus. This story of Ahaz and Isaiah and the baby Immanuel pointing forward to the day when "God with us" wouldn't just be the prophetic name of a royal baby boy, but when a royal baby boy would

be born who would literally be "God with us". How the story of Abraham taking Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him and the Lord providing a ram in Isaac's place, how that story prefigured and prepared the people for the cross, where the Lord gave his only and beloved Son to die in the place of his sinful people. How the giving of the law and the building of the tabernacle were but lights pointing forward to the day when the Lord would pour out his Spirit on his people. How even the Exodus and the Passover—the great and defining events of Israel's story—are now, in the light of Jesus, but little candles along the way, preparing the people for the day when the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus would deliver the people, not just from the oppression of a pagan king, but from the dominion of sin and death.

So Matthew's point is this: We need to understand the story of Jesus—his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his lordship—everything we sum up in that acclamation during the Lord's Supper when we say, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."—Matthew wants us to know that this isn't some new story that stands all by itself. He wants us to know that it's the continuation of the great story of the God of Israel and his people, the long story that goes all the way back to Abraham. And not just that, but that it's the culmination of that story. Remember I said that the great overarching theme of that big story is the faithfulness of God. Ever since Abraham, God has been calling people to trust him. We live in a world broken by sin and death. We all know it's not supposed to be this way. And so we try to fix it. And there are all sorts of ideas out there about how to do that. Pray to this god. Follow that philosophy. And into the midst of the darkness and the chaos the Lord reveals himself and says: Leave your idols and follow me.

But why would we? What could ever inspire a person to abandon Zeus or Baal for the God of Israel? What could ever inspire a person to give up the philosophy of Plato or Epicurus for the God of Israel? What would inspire our

ancestors to stop worshipping oak trees or ancestors? Brothers and Sisters, it's the story—the story that reminds us over and over and over and over that this Lord is faithful—that he does what he says. And we see it first and foremost as it all comes together in Jesus. In him we see the loving character of God as he gives himself to fulfil his promises for the sake of his people. And in Jesus we see the Lord setting this word to rights. The very thing that all the other gods and philosophies promise, but can never deliver—a new age, a new creation—Brothers and Sisters, the Lord has delivered it in the death and resurrection of Jesus: the defeat of sin and death and new life. Immanuel—"God with us". For real. Fulfilling his promises as he plunges us into the *life* of his Spirit in our baptism. Showing he is worthy of our faith, our trust, our loyalty, our allegiance, our worship. When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," he's pointing back to that story of God's faithfulness, back to all those lights along the way in the darkness that have led us to him—to the full brightness of God's blazing glory and saying, "Trust me."

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honour and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*