

Sunday Sermon – The Holy Birth
Pittsford Community Church
December 4th, 2016
Isaiah 7:1-14
Major Theme: The Sign of Immanuel

Introduction – Today’s advent topic is the Holy Birth. In the midst of the busyness and the hustle and bustle of the holidays it is easy to overlook the gravity of the holy birth.

Obviously a huge part of advent is focused on the miracle of the Holy Birth – God coming to earth, the birth of Jesus Christ on that starry night in Bethlehem’s manger. What we are going to look at today is the meaning and significance of the Holy Birth. Specifically the “Sign of Immanuel” found in Isaiah chapter 7.

Before we get into it, I do recognize that there are several hard to believe issues surrounding the holy birth - whether the issue is that Christ was born of a virgin, or that Jesus was God incarnate, or that Mary conceived a child through the Holy Spirit. Defending the legitimacy of those beliefs isn’t what I intend to do today, but I believe that when it comes to issues pertaining to the holy birth God has given us ample reason to trust his word and to believe that what it says is true.

However, if this is something that you are interested in studying further there are several good resources for you to examine including: Erwin Lutzer’s “7 Reasons why you can Trust the Bible” and James MacDonald’s “God wrote a Book.”

What we are going to look at today is the significance of the sign of Immanuel as it relates to Christ’s birth. Matthew says in his gospel, “***What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.***” ***All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).*** As Christians we might immediately jump to the incarnation, that God would become flesh and dwell among us, as the extent of what Matthew means when he references Isaiah 7:14. But upon further study we will see that it’s meaning is far more robust than just that.

See, Matthew didn’t just remember a random phrase from the OT and just apply it to Christ. Without context that’s a very dangerous thing to do.

Remember that when it comes to studying and understanding scripture we must first understand what it meant to them before we can figure out what it means for us.

- That’s why we don’t just rip open the Bible, point to a passage and claim that as God’s truth for our own life. Context determines meaning.
- So you can bet that Matthew knew the context surrounding the sign of Immanuel in Isaiah 7 and its meaning and it was very deliberately brought it into his gospel concerning Christ.

So let's see what we can learn from Isaiah 7 concerning Immanuel and therefore the Holy birth.

Background

About 734 BC – Assyria was the looming world superpower at the time. The dominance of the all-conquering nation of Assyria began to threaten the unconquered nations around her which included Aram (Syria) and the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim). These two nations united themselves in an alliance against King Ahaz of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. This was an attempt to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian coalition. When Ahaz was not willing to join the fight against the powerful Assyrians, Syria and Ephraim attacked Judah with the hopes of instituting a “regime change” in which the new ruler would join forces with them.

Ahaz knew that Judah was outmatched by the “Syro-Ephramite” alliance and he began to fear for both his and his nation's safety (Isa. 7:2-4). The LORD then calls Isaiah to counsel Ahaz. Isaiah tells him not to fear and that his nation will not be overcome by Aram and Israel (7:7). However, in order for Judah to stand against them, Ahaz must “stand firm in faith” and trust in the LORD's protection (7:9 NRSV).

Ok, so what we see here is that Ahaz/God's people have a problem - twofold

- physical in nature – a war, a dire circumstance, a situation causing uncertainty and angst - - We can relate to that

- spiritual in nature – it had to do with his faith and his trust in the Lord
Reality #1: Listen church: ***In all times and circumstances, no matter how dire or uncertain it may seem, God calls us to a life of faith (v. 1-9).***

- That's why God sends Isaiah to Ahaz. That's why God gives us others in our walks of faith to encourage us to live faithfully.
- In light of everything going on in the world at the time, God sends Isaiah to Ahaz with a message to refocus his attention, not on the world, not on his circumstances, but on him.
- Look at the reality of the situation:
 - ***“they could not overpower it.” (v.1)***
 - Truth – they couldn't get in! – Why? God was being faithful to his people.
 - Ahaz didn't see that. He was looking at the problem at hand merely through physical eyes. He had no perspective, no realization of God anywhere in his situation. And because of that, his perception of the problem is that it was too big to handle and this made him extremely fearful. The unknown scared him.
 - Sometimes we perceive our trouble as greater than it actually is OR we perceive our God to be smaller than he actually is, where he is unable to handle our situation. We need to

handle it. We need to fight, we need to control, we need to defend, we need to right a wrong.

- But the result of this thinking is fear, it's not strength...

- "The hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken" (v.2)

- Fear – caused by shortsightedness and a lack of perspective – their God was too small and their problem was too big

- Elisha and servant (Syria) – "God open his eyes"

- You see, sometimes our perspective is too small

- And when it is too small it causes irrational behavior and poor decisions when it comes to a life of faith.

- So I think God's message to Ahaz can be his message to us this

morning...

- "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stumps of firewood." (v.4)

- Love the imagery – firewood, burning up, soon gone

- God does not give us a spirit of fear but of power, love, and sound

mind

- God is saying, "Your problems to me are easily handled and quickly

resolved "

- Support Raising with Crusade – Wii transaction for support – don't do that, don't rob my worship of God by turning it into a business transaction.

- Attacks on character, relationship issues, communication issues, financial issues – keep calm and don't be afraid

- "It will not take place, it will not happen, (v.7)

- The thing will not consume you. Church: Your problems do not need to consume you, instead recognize and rest in God's authority, power, and control.

- Ex. 14:14 – love this verse – "The Lord will fight for you. You only have to be silent."

- Ps. 46 – a picture of a similar situation – a war in which nations were rising up against God's people and there was ample reason to be uncertain and to doubt and the Lord with his mighty hand shows up and says "Be still and know that I am God." And he puts an end to the war and delivers his people.

- Our theme this advent is still. God calls his people to trust him – his authority, power, control. His ability to keep life's smoldering stumps of firewood from burning us. If we have this perspective of God, this awe, this confidence, this trust, it will allow God to still our spirit and bring peace into our lives.

BUT that is followed with a warning...

- "If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all." (v.9)

- This is a statement of reality that if our lives, our trust, and our decisions are not based on something solid, if they are not rooted in a faith in God, the rock upon which we can stand, our firm foundation, then when the storms of life come, and the floods of life rise, and the winds of life blow we will not be able to stand against it, we will fall. They will consume us and we will depart from the Lord.

Reality #2) Instead of acting faithfully, we reject God and, therefore, fall under his judgment

“Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.” Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also?”

- A few weeks ago, I talked about the difference in scripture between the Lord saying at times “Put me to the test” and in other contexts “Do not put me to the test.” – act of faith verses entitlement
- Here we might be tempted to say to Ahaz, “good response, you got the answer right” when in fact it was very wrong.
 - o When God says “put me to the test” and you say no, in essence what you are doing is replacing worship of God with idolatry. Instead of placing my trust in God I have something else which I will use as a lifeline and my trust is ultimately in that. (Anything – job, kids, substances, relationships, church family, my attitude or anger) This is not faith its faithlessness. This is not honoring to God it is sin.
 - o Ahaz doesn’t ask not because he’s pious but because he has already rejected faith as an option and will try to find his salvation in his own might and plans. That is why God responds to him the way he does.

But here’s the character of God...here’s the good news

Reality #3) Despite our rampant faithlessness, God is faithful to us

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (v.14)

- Immanuel means “God is with us”
- In trying to obtain God’s promises, in trying to obtain our salvation, in trying to obtain the good life and peace and security, and sometimes even just plain old stability if we are in a tough spot in life, we tend to look to human strength and initiative, physical substances. God looks to the birth of a child.
- God would deliver Ahaz and his people as he said he would do – in spite of their lack of faith, in spite of their trust in idols, in spite of the fact that their faithlessness had caused them to be under God’s judgment – God would send Ahaz a sign - the birth of a child, the sign of Immanuel – to let him know that even though he was guilty and his guilt would have very real consequences, God would be with him and God would be the source of his people’s salvation.

This is the context, the full picture, that Matthew applies to Christ in the first chapter of his gospel. You see because God has too sent us a sign saying, ***“What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took***

place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

What is the significance of the Holy Birth to God's people in the NT? It's this - that God is with us. But it is much more than simply his physical presence here in this world. It is a sign to us that God has not abandoned us. It is a sign to us that our sin and our faithlessness have not condemned us to our own destruction. It is a sign of hope and ever-present help in time of need even in the midst of outright rejection. It's simply this: that a sinful people was destined to be under the judgment of God because they were a faithless people who rejected him, but the arrival of God's "Emmanuel" carried with him the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. This child would take the judgment of God, the judgment destined for us, on himself so that we might be saved.
"Be still and know that I am God."