

# Immanuel

## Isaiah 7:10-16

<sup>10</sup> Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup> 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."

Advent is a time of yearning and hope. In the Fourth Sunday, Isaiah brings us round to the great sign of God's promise: a young woman will give birth to a son whose name will be Immanuel, "God with us." Because this season comes every year, the church has become over familiarity with these words about a young conceiving and bearing a son and we may take this proclamation for granted, but some have never heard or understood our religious language and are mystified. Therefore let us reexamine this text.

John M. Buchanan in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* states that we "must begin with the preceding verses, Isaiah 7:10-16, which describe the all-important" scene for our text:

Ahaz, king of Judah, is frightened, and all his subjects with him. Two neighboring states teamed up to attack Jerusalem, and "the heart of his people shook as trees of the forest shake before the wind." The Lord sent Isaiah to Ahaz to assure him that all will be well. "Be quiet, do not fear...If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.

Our "text begins in the middle of...paralyzing fear.

Ahaz is too frightened to trust the promise...delivered by the prophet. So the Lord spoke directly to Ahaz and invited the anxious monarch to ask God for a sign to seal the promise. Ahaz is so paralyzed by fear to take God up on the offer. Exasperated, Isaiah takes Ahaz by the hand and points to the sign that has already been given. 'Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son.' Ahaz would have preferred something a little more substantial, a division or two of battle ready soldiers, to repel the expected invasion. A pregnant young woman? An infant son? This infant son, however, is Emmanuel, and in him and his name will be power to give courage and stiffen the resolve and hope of a frightened king and his people.

The king was afraid that he would be the last king of the family of David. The enemy was stronger and more numerous than any that he could amass. They were better trained and fearless, where Ahaz's troops were few and greatly afraid. All looked hopeless, but the prophesy is that God is with us. What does it mean?

First it means that every time a child is born we can see in that child the promise of God's presence. Scientists say that the biological functions of what the egg and sperm have to go through to become fertilized is unbelievable, and there is the environment in which the child grows, where all kinds of things can go terribly wrong. So for a baby to be born at all, healthy or not is a miracle. Most parents look into that little face and see all their hopes and dreams for the future. Each one has the potential of becoming a Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Mother Theresa, George Bush, Barack Obama, Margaret Thatcher, a Supreme Court Justice, Politician, doctor, lawyer, business owner, or educator.

God said of the child born during the reign of Ahaz, by the time the child is weaned and can eat table food, you will have seen my power against your enemies. You will know that is a God, who made heaven and earth, that is with you, leading and guiding, so that other will know of God's power and grace. God was telling Ahaz that God could be trusted.

About 700 years later, when the people of Israel was again under threat, but this time from a different power, the Roman government that ruled with an iron fist and heavy taxation, God's promise was remembered and again claimed. That time a young woman was with child and gave birth to a son. She and Joseph named him Jesus, meaning savior and God with us. That child's birth, life, death and resurrection changed to whole world. Even today wars are suspense to celebrate that day of his birth.

We are not very different from the people of Ahaz's time, or Jesus' time, in that we are often frightened people, under all sorts of threatening and oppressive circumstances. And for those that invite Mary's child into their lives, he indeed is God with us. He changes the way we treat one another, he changes our selfish hearts into generous hearts. I do be-mourn when people spend more than they can afford on Christmas gifts, but Christmas is the one season of the year when we are more concerned about others than we are about ourselves. This is a true radiation of the light of God reflecting in and through us.

As we think about what it means for God to be with us, I believe a modern day parable is worth repeating.

### **Footprints in the Sand**

One night I dreamed a dream.  
As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.  
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,  
One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,  
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.  
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,  
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,  
there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.  
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,  
You'd walk with me all the way.  
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,  
there was only one set of footprints.  
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you  
Never, ever, during your trials and testings.  
When you saw only one set of footprints,  
It was then that I carried you."

- by Margaret Fishback Powers

God, who, it was believed in ancient time, is holy and powerful and righteous, is also merciful and kind and ready to act in ways that are liberating and just on behalf of God's people. The blessings of Christmas are less about good times with family or friends, and more about the prophetic traditions of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace on earth, righteousness and right relationship. "Immanuel," "God with us. **Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare**

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