**4th Sunday in Advent – Year A – December 22, 2013 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Isaiah 7:1-17 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Do Not be Afraid! Jesus is Immanuel!**

*1 When Ahaz* *son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin* *of Aram* *and Pekah* *son of Remaliah* *king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. 2 Now the house of David* *was told, "Aram has allied itself with* *Ephraim**"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken,* *as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. 3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub,* *to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field.* *4 Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm* *and don't be afraid.* *Do not lose heart* *because of these two smoldering stubs* *of firewood--because of the fierce anger* *of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.* *5 Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's* *son have plotted* *your ruin, saying, 6 "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." 7 Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says:* *" 'It will not take place, it will not happen,* *8 for the head of Aram is Damascus,* *and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.* *Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered* *to be a people. 9 The head of Ephraim is Samaria,* *and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand* *firm in your faith,* *you will not stand at all.' "* *10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask the LORD your God for a sign,* *whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.**" 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.**" 13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David!* *Is it not enough* *to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience* *of my God* *also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you* *a sign:* *The virgin* *will be with child and will give birth to a son,* *and* *will call him Immanuel.* *15 He will eat curds* *and honey* *when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. 16 But before the boy knows* *enough to reject the wrong and choose the right,* *the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.* *17 The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away* *from Judah--he will bring the king of Assyria.**"*

Have you ever heard of laminin? I hadn’t either until a family member forwarded me an email a few weeks ago. Laminin is a protein in the body that keeps all of the cells together inside the internal organs of the human body. It’s kind of like the glue that keeps the tissues of your organs together. Interestingly enough, the molecular structure of this protein is in the shape of a cross. A few years ago, the pastor of a mega-church asked his congregation, “How do you know that God will hold you together?” In his sermon, he argued that God designed laminin in the shape of a cross and uses it as glue to hold our bodies together as a sign from God so that we might know that God keeps us together.

There’s a problem here. You see, that pastor is using laminin to prove a Biblical truth. He’s using something outside of Scripture to prove a truth that God has already spoken in his Word. From Colossians 1:17, **“[Jesus] is before all things (which means he is eternal), and in him all things hold together.”** All God asks is that we simply accept that truth for what it is: his infallible, inerrant, inspired, Almighty promise.

A further problem is that many people today look for these “signs” from God. In our “fast food” culture folks prefer the “drive through” when it comes to knowing God’s truths. A sign is more convenient than taking the time to open the Bible, study it, pray on it, and allow God to speak through his promises.

Have you fallen prey to that trap? At times, when you are under difficult circumstances, it seems that it would be more convenient to have God send a sign that you will have peace, security and that everything will be ok. Have you forgotten the sure promises God has given you? That’s the problem that faced a king in the story this morning from Isaiah chapter 7.

King Ahaz was king over the southern kingdom of Judah. He was a direct descendant of King David, about 250 years after David ruled. The Bible tells us that King Ahaz did not walk in the ways of his father David. To say that he was wicked is an understatement. He bowed down to the false gods of the neighboring nations. He built altars to these gods all over his kingdom. He even built an altar to these gods in the temple in Jerusalem. He even went so far as to sacrifice his sons in the fire to these gods. He led the people of Judah away from the true God.

To discipline King Ahaz, God allowed the armies of the countries of Aram and Ephraim to trounce the armies of Judah on the battlefield. In one day the armies of Judah suffered 120,000 casualties, and the enemy captured 200,000 of their women and children. In our story this morning, we read that those same enemy armies combined forces to march against Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Our lesson says, **“The hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.”** (vs2) Sure they were scared! They knew they had no chance of winning! They were dead.

But the LORD sent his prophet Isaiah and told him to tell Ahaz, **“Be careful**, in other words, pay attention**, keep calm, don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart,** this is, stop being timid, **because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood**, these two armies that are burned out. They’re saying to themselves, “We’re going to attack and destroy the city, and make one of our sons ruler over it.” But this is what the Sovereign LORD says, **“It will not take place, it will not happen.”** Not only will the city be saved, in a few years this enemy coalition will cease to exist.

What an encouraging promise from the LORD, so sure and certain and final! But King Ahaz revealed the true nature of the human spirit – stubbornness and a refusal to listen to God. Instead of relying on the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth, King Ahaz sought an alliance with the king of Assyria. Ahaz even went so far as to send the king of Assyria vessels of gold from the temple in Jerusalem to secure this alliance.

God revealed his true nature, love and patience and forgiveness. He sent his prophet to King Ahaz once again, **“Ask the LORD your God for a sign.”**  The LORD, the God who loves to make promises and loves even more to keep promises, was willing to strengthen the fearful heart of this king and his people, with a miracle. Can you imagine if God spoke to you and said, “Ask me to perform a miraculous sign, anything you want me to do: pigs will fly, hell will literally freeze over, Skittles candy will rain from the skies, the Minnesota Vikings will win a Super Bowl, anything you want, I will give you a sign to strengthen your faith in my promises. You want me to crush these armies with a show of force? I will wow the nations and make them tremble and prove to you my willingness to save my people, to prove to them that I am with them. King Ahaz continued to reveal his true sinful human nature and responded with hypocrisy, **“I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.”** Isaiah replied, “**Why are you testing the LORD’s patience**?”

If you were in that position, wouldn’t you want a sign from God that everything was going to be ok?

My friends, you are in that situation, aren’t you? You are constantly surrounded by war. You are threatened by acts of terrorism every day. Just about every month you read about a shooting in a school or mall. There is violence on the streets - this “knock out” game that is growing in popularity among teenagers - the goal is to deliver one single sucker punch on a random stranger in the back of the head and knock them out. Don’t you want a sign from God that he will protect you?

A Christian father is suspended from a TV show because he quoted Scripture, because he stood firmly on the principles God has given. Perhaps he didn’t do so in a way that was loving and kind, but you might wonder to yourself, “If that happened to him, why couldn’t it happen to me?” God wants me to speak his Word. He wants me to stand on the truths of his Word. Perhaps you would like a sign from God that when you stand up and speak the truth, and do so in love, even when you are harassed and persecuted, that everything will be ok.

For some of you the holiday season is not a holly jolly Christmas. You are without loved ones who have gone, either through divorce, distance or death. Wouldn’t you want a sign from God that everything was going to be ok for you? A sign from God that he is with you?

King Ahaz had that opportunity, but he squandered it. But God said, **“The LORD himself will give you a sign.”**  What’s interesting about that pronoun “you” is that it is plural. The gracious LORD gave this promise not just to King Ahaz for his sake, but to the whole nation of Judah, to the world. vs.14, **“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”**

No show of force, no miraculous sign in the heavens above or in the depths of hell, but salvation would come through a woman, a virgin. In that culture in that time… that was humiliating to a king, that salvation would come through a woman, a virgin, and not through the strength and power of armies and kings. Improbable… impossible… but this sign, that a virgin would conceive, give birth to a son, would prove that God is Immanuel, a Hebrew name that means “God with us.”

Here is your sign: God will accomplish the impossible. A baby boy was conceived in the womb of a virgin, and that baby was the God from all eternity. The great and powerful God of all creation became so small. He came into this earth as a microscopic embryo, and had to grow, and mature. But in this person, whom they named Jesus, both God and man were found, the fullness of God embodied in human flesh and bone. “God is with us” in the one person of Jesus Christ.

There is the sign. Jesus is Immanuel. There is the miracle, that your gracious Lord points you to and says, “Be still. Don’t be afraid. Don’t lose heart. I am Immanuel.”

I’ll give you more signs, more miracles to convince you that you don’t need to be afraid, why you will be quiet and still and calm. Isaiah prophesied what Immanuel would do when he came to earth as the God –Man. **“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve.”** (61.1-3) First of all, isn’t that amazing, how descriptive Isaiah’s words were, 700 years before Jesus would tell the sinful woman, “Your sins are forgiven,” 700 years before he preached the sermon on the mount, 700 years before he opened the eyes of the blind man and unplugged the ears of the deaf man and loosened the tongue of the mute man, 700 years before he released that woman from the prison of demon-possession, before he cleansed the lepers, before he raised the synagogue leader’s dead daughter back to life, God promised that Immanuel would do it, and he did. He did these things for your salvation and to prove to you that he is with you. Yes, Jesus is Immanuel. Isn’t that comforting?

What sign do you need from Jesus to prove that he is Immanuel? Listen to Isaiah, **“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** (53.4-6) Isn’t that beautiful? Isaiah wrote these words as if he himself were standing under the cross, watching his Savior die for him and for all mankind, to take away their sins, your sins. He wrote as if this had already happened. That’s how sure and certain God’s promises are. There’s your sign. Jesus is Immanuel, God came to live with us, to suffer and die for us.

Do you need another sign from Jesus? Listen to Isaiah, **“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.”**  (53.11) That’s a reason not to be afraid. Even before it happened, God prophesied that Immanuel would rise from his grave, and he has made the same prophecy about you. Isaiah wrote, **“But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. The earth will give birth to her dead.”** (26.19) Another reason to listen to God when he says, “Don’t be afraid. Jesus is Immanuel.”

Do you need another sign that God is with you? On that great day when the earth gives birth to your bodies, you will live and stand before God, you will stand unafraid because God said through Isaiah, **“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.”** He said, **“I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. I have redeemed you.”** (44.22) You will stand confident before the God and Judge of all the earth because Jesus is Immanuel, his promise of forgiveness goes with you, even to the end.

While you and I wait for that great day we are surrounded by war and violence, attacked for the truths of God upon which we stand, alone and helpless, fearful and frightened. And at times it appears that we cannot win. We grow weak and faint. But then God comes to you again and again through his Word and commands you, “Don’t be afraid. Keep calm. Do not lose heart. Jesus is Immanuel. Here is the sign.” **“But now this is what the LORD says – he who created you, who formed you; fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”** (43.1-5) **“I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”** (41.10 **“Listen to me, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”** (46.3-4)

Do you need a sign that Jesus is Immanuel? Here are all the signs you need - in this book – words from the very mouth of God. You will see miracles every single day. You will see signs from God every single day, right here in his Word. And in just three days, you will again see the greatest sign, **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”** Go to the manger with the shepherds, with Isaiah, and see that sign, and gaze at him, and ponder, and be amazed that Jesus is Immanuel. And leave the manger unafraid, confident, at peace, knowing that Jesus is Immanuel. God be with you. Amen.