

Isaiah 7:10 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.”

¹²But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.”

¹³Then 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? ¹⁴Therefore 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

IMMANUEL – GOD WITH US

Dear Friends in Christ,

Christmas gift-giving. In the next few days I hope you have the joy of getting a gift you would not have gotten for yourself, but someone else did. I hope you feel the thankfulness of getting a gift that you had no right to expect. I hope that joy is yours. It is a picture, in miniature, of the real meaning of Christmas: God’s great, gracious gift Jesus.

On the other hand, one of the ugliest scenes happens when someone opens a gift and says, “This isn’t the one I wanted!” Such a gift-getter never really viewed it as a gift. To them it was an obligation, their wages. A true gift, however, is something we really don’t deserve or expect. When we get a gift we realize that someone has taken some of their treasure and graciously shared it with us in a way they thought would be special.

If we go into gift-getting without expectations, then every gift is received with a smile, a sincere “Thank you”, and a hug. May this be your gift experience this coming Saturday or Sunday, whichever your family’s custom might be.

I. A Generous Offer

What happens in our text is a gift giving of sorts. God wanted to give a gift to a man named Ahaz. God wanted to give the gift through a man named Isaiah. Let’s listen.

Isaiah said to Ahaz, “*Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.*” Ahaz answered, “*I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.*” What do you think of that? Maybe Ahaz was just being a good gift-getter, making no demands on God, the giver. Before we make a judgment, let’s get to know these two men.

One of them, you already know. He has the familiar name of Isaiah. He is the prophet of God who wrote the longest book of the Bible. A lot of our weekly Old Testament readings come from the book of Isaiah. But what sort of prophet was he? Was he one of those scowling, fire-and-brimstone kind of guys? While Isaiah had his fiery moments, that wasn’t his nature. Many Bible scholars call Isaiah “The Evangelist of the Old Testament.” Isaiah abounds in beautiful Gospel passages: gems like, “*Come let us reason together, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*” Or maybe you like that hymn “On Eagles’ Wings.” That hymn is the last verse of Isaiah chapter 40. For the classical music people out there, you know about Handel’s holiday favorite *The Messiah*. The first movement of that masterpiece is “Comfort, Ye My People”, the first verse of Isaiah chapter 40. And then there is the well-known Isaiah 53, “*By his wounds we are healed...*” In today’s reading, Isaiah, the Evangelist of the Old Testament, hikes the footpaths around Jerusalem to find a man named Ahaz.

But who is Ahaz? When you look at Ahaz the first thing you notice is a crown. He is the king of

Judah, the southern half of Israel. When you look into his face, you notice tell-tale signs of high stress and sleepless nights. At the time of our reading, two kings had allied themselves against Ahaz. Things had been going badly for King Ahaz. His armies had lost one battle after another. Now the enemy had marched up to the walls of his capital city. Things didn't look good for the home team. In fact, the enemies were licking their chops. They had already publicized the man they wanted to put on Judah's throne once they finished off Ahaz and his armies (7:6).

Imagine that, the armies of our nation so embattled and harried and demoralized that our enemies have made it public knowledge about whom they will soon set in the Oval Office. May it never be!

Ahaz is in a very bad position. So Isaiah shows up offering a word of hope from the Lord, saying, "In this time of doubt and worry, name any sign you want to assure you that God is with you. God will give it." You might expect Ahaz to take Isaiah up on the offer. But Ahaz says, "***I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.***"

Which sounds like a good gift getter. Who is he to dictate to the gift giver? The Law of Moses says, "*Do not test the LORD your God.*" When Ahaz says, "I will not put the Lord to the test," it sounds good. In fact, that is such a true truth that Jesus himself quoted the same words when the devil tempted him. Jesus said, "*It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*" Ahaz answers with Christ-like words! But are they good words?

Let's reconsider real-life gift giving. Dad is watching his team on the Week 14, 1pm Sunday football game. His boy comes up to his chair with an ad in his hand and demands, "Dad! See this? You need to buy me this!" If he is serious, he is way out of line! No one can *demand* a gift.

But let us imagine a different event. Let's say that that same dad takes his same son to the store of his choice. As they walk through the sliding doors dad says, "Son, choose anything you like. I will buy it." His son says, "Dad, I really don't want anything you have to offer. Let's just go home." And the reason he says it is not because his dad can't afford such an offer, but because he really doesn't want anything if it would have his dad's name attached to it. Is that not be a slap in the face?

This is what Ahaz spoke to Isaiah. God comes, making an offer almost unique in the history of the world, "I, your God, want to give you an assurance... something... anything... anything sign you want. Ask your heart's desire." And Ahaz says, "Not interested." Only he is cunning and diplomatic enough to cloak his contempt for God in godly sounding words, "Oh, no. I wouldn't want to test God."

When we look around we see that this isn't that unusual. God's offers of grace and every blessing are everywhere. The offer of forgiveness in Jesus is put out there, but the message is looked down upon. Its messengers are often disregarded as fanatics. Even among God's people, God's offers of grace and strength, word and sacrament are greeted with yawns. "Come, be strengthened at home and at church." But how many hours of this month have been taken up accepting this gracious offer of God? Often (maybe usually) his offers take a back seat to what we have to get done this weekend, what our kids are occupied with, the living we have to make.

God sometimes gets a very cool reception when he happens up upon us walking the paths of our lives. And we say, "Eww, you again. Not right now. Come back some other time. I'm kind of busy."

Each of us, in different ways and at different times, is an Ahaz, who looks at God's invitation to take part in his blessings, and we try to figure out how we can get this message and messenger off our doorstep. We try to cloak our refusal in the godliest sounding vocabulary we can.

II. A More Generous Offer

Thank God that God is more patient than we are stubborn. Even when we brush him off, like the most popular person in school brushes off a completely un-cool former friend, even then God come back to us. He keeps on calling us to be fed, here in God's Word, here in the Sacrament of Holy

Communion, to be forgiven in Jesus.

God displays his faithfulness in our reading. For after Ahaz had brushed off God's gracious offer, Isaiah went on, "***Will you try the patience of my God? 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...***" and then in the words just after our text, "*[This Immanuel...] before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you fear will be laid waste.*" (13-16) God is saying, "While this Immanuel is still a young child, the powerful enemies you fear today will be shouldering ruins."

Now you will notice something here. Immanuel, to Isaiah and Ahaz, was a child in their own time, 750B.C. The frustrating thing about this prophecy of Isaiah to Ahaz is that we don't have any of the follow-up details. This is the only place we hear about this Immanuel. Who is the virgin? We don't know. Who was the child? We don't know. Apparently he was someone known to both King Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah. Also, we should not think of this woman and child in Isaiah 7 as another virgin birth, like Mary's (we will have to talk about that a little bit in Bible class today). It was simply that a young woman known to Isaiah and Ahaz would soon have a child. For that child the sign was not a miraculous birth, but that before that child was a few years old, the existential threat facing Judah and King Ahaz would be erased. And every time that Ahaz or anyone else looked at that child named Immanuel, every time they looked at him, they would remember something.

About that... Our church body supports a medical mission in a couple African countries. It started back about 1960. Especially in the first thirty years or so, an important part of that medical mission was helping to deliver babies. Our nurses would go over there, volunteering for two or three years. Over that time they would deliver hundreds of babies. Now the people of central Africa, like the American Indians, often name their children after events surrounding the birth. I could tell you some stories of some strange names. But here is one of the really cool things. If a nurse named Gertrude were at our medical mission for three years, by the end of her time there, there would be a couple Gertrudes in each of the villages around the mission. If a nurse named Linda got off the plane, there would soon be a crop of Lindas, because the parents wanted to remember that nurse. Those parents wanted it to be that every time they called their child's name over the years, they would remember how that special nurse had once helped them, by God's blessing, bring a new little blessing into the world.

That was this child Immanuel to Ahaz. Every time that Ahaz would call or hear the name of the little tyke, he would remember how he had despaired of life and kingship. And whether he wanted to or not, he would remember how God had come to him and promised him—even though he was not a very godly person—how God had promised and delivered him from his enemies. Immanuel: God with Us.

The name Immanuel was first given to a child in 750BC. Centuries later the same name, by God's command, was prophesied to a greater child. Not by a prophet to a king, but by an angel to a carpenter. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph seven or eight months before Jesus' birth, the name Immanuel was used again. This second Immanuel would be even more truly "God with us" than the first. Not merely God helping his people, but God living with his people, becoming one of his people.

Prophesied to Joseph was a child who would come, not merely as a sign and remembrance of God's help, but one who would come to save Isaiah and Ahaz and Joseph and Mary and you and me from our sins. For we have sinned often in our lukewarm service to God. But in this promised one, we have God himself fighting our battles against sin and guilt and Satan and death. Truly, God with us.

In him there is hope, because there once was a time when God truly was with us. It is Immanuel's coming that we await. Amen.