

THIS AND THAT

ISAIAH 7:10-16; MATTHEW 1:18-25

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We are three days away from Christmas. We are preparing to enter into the old, old story again.

It's a strange thing that, as followers of Jesus, we are dwellers in stories.

Religion often sets itself up as ideology or a philosophy or an ethical system that provides answers to deep questions about the meaning of life and the nature of salvation.

But as Christians, we are not given a generic, "universal" set of principles or techniques or transcendent truths or ethical absolutes by which to live; we are, rather, thrust into a story.

And a messy story, at that, full of strange places and people and names that are hard to pronounce—much of which took place a very long time ago, in a world that looks very unlike the one we live in today.

Where we might prefer 10 steps to authentic spirituality, we are given the story of a baby born in a cattle trough in a barn.

Where we might prefer a simple, straightforward description of the nature of God, we are given a long meandering journey with a human community and shown how God deals with these people.

Where we would might prefer inspiration for the process of self-actualization, we are confronted by a Jewish Palestinian revolutionary who hung out with lepers and whores and misfits, and who spoke uncomfortable, uncompromising words about dying to ourselves, talking up a cross, loving enemies, resisting the allure of money... about a world where last are first and first are last.

Where we might prefer principles and techniques and rational answers to abstract questions, we get a colourful cast of characters—real human beings responding to real situations in the real world.

The German philosopher Gotthold Lessing famously said that there was an “ugly ditch” between the messy events of history and the pure truths of reason—a ditch that he could not and would not cross.

Many people feel the same. They don’t like the idea that God would expect us to encounter truth through the particularities of human stories and human history.

But as Christians we are convinced that God comes to us through stories. We do not encounter God in any other way. We are given a story with characters and people and places, and we are invited to see *our* stories *in* those stories.

In our texts today, we are presented with two characters separated by over 700 years.

Both are faced with a situation that demands a choice. Both are confronted by a God who is at work in unexpected ways, both are required to respond, and both of their responses demonstrates what they believe about God and the world.

Let’s start with our reading from Isaiah.

King Ahaz was the king of Judah in the eighth century before Christ, and he ruled during a time of great political turmoil.

(Quick history lesson: Judah was the southern kingdom that was the result of a split way back during the time of Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, David’s grandson.

What had been the unified kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon, split into two, the ten tribes of "Israel" with their capital up in Samaria, and the tribes of Benjamin and Judah forming the kingdom of "Judah" with their capital at Jerusalem.)

So, Ahaz is ruling Judah from Jerusalem, in the south. There is a great threat looming—the threat of the Assyrian empire.

Ahaz was faced with political pressure on a number of fronts. He could either form an alliance of his own with Assyria, or he could join Israel and Syria (also

known as Aram)—who are threatening to overtake Judah anyway—in a coalition *against* the mighty Assyrian Empire.

Enter, the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s counsel to Ahaz is to do neither, but to take a more neutral position and concentrate on his policies at home.

Ahaz is quaking in his boots, as are the people of Judah (Isa. 7:2). Isaiah comes to him in 7:4 and says, “Don’t be afraid. The alliances that frighten you will be shortlived. The Lord will not allow them to survive. Stand firm in faith” (7:9).

And then in verse 10, where our text began this morning, the Lord, through Isaiah, says to Ahaz, “Ask for a sign to prove that this is true. Anything at all!”

Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign.

This sounds noble, doesn’t it? Doesn’t Jesus himself rebuke people for demanding a sign, for putting God to the test?

But scholars are almost unanimous in their conclusion that Ahaz’s refusal to ask for a sign is evidence of false piety and cowardice. His refusal to ask for a sign is an attempted justification for the course of action he wishes to pursue, which is an alliance with Assyria.

(We see this in Isaiah’s exasperated response to Ahaz in 7:13—“must you weary God?!”)

Ahaz is convinced that only by aligning himself with the Empire will he and his people will be saved.

And he does this. We read about it in 2 Kings 16. The kings of Syria and Israel are waging war against Jerusalem, and Ahaz calls out to King Tiglath Pileser of Assyria for help:

⁷ Ahaz sent messengers to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria [remember what I was saying about strange people and names? ☺], saying, “I am your servant and your son. Come up, and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.” ⁸ Ahaz also took the silver and gold found in the house of the LORD and in the treasures of the king’s house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria. ⁹ The king of Assyria listened to him; the king of Assyria marched up against Damascus....

So we know how the story will end—Ahaz refusing the sign offered by the Lord, taking the conventional path, trusting in worldly power and military might to secure his future.

But back to Isaiah. In the face of Ahaz’s refusal of the sign, Isaiah says, in essence, “well fine, then. You don’t want to ask the Lord for a sign? You want to test God’s patience with false humility? Well, 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. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For 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.”

Now, Christians have been quite eager to say that Isaiah was talking about Jesus here. And we’ll get to that in a bit.

But when we read this text in context, we see that things are a bit stranger than that. Isaiah’s words and the promise of this child as the sign of Immanuel are a direct response to Ahaz’s faithlessness and fear in the shadow of a military invasion.

Scholars aren’t sure who Isaiah was talking about. Some suggest that the mother-to-be was Ahaz’s wife, and the son-to-be-born was Hezekiah. Others suggest the “son” is Isaiah’s son.

Either way, the son—the sign of “God with us” in Isaiah—will be only a few years old by the time the two nations that Ahaz is quaking in his boots in fear of will be laid to waste (Isa. 7:16-17).

The promise is that before this child is even a toddler—before “he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good”—he shall be eating curds and honey (many scholars believe this is a reference to being forced to live off the land during a time of war and scarcity) and the land of these two nations that King Ahaz is so terrified of, will be deserted.

We are used to plucking verse 14 out of this narrative as a hopeful Christmas text pointing to the birth of Jesus, but in Isaiah, the sign of Immanuel is not a sign of hope, but of judgment for Ahaz’s failure to trust in the Lord.

What about our reading from Matthew?

Well, we are now around 730 years later in the story than we were in Isaiah.

In Matthew, we see are invited to consider the circumstances around the birth of Christ from the perspective of another character, Jesus' adoptive father Joseph.

We see that Joseph, too, is presented with a choice.

Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married (in first century Jewish culture this would have been at least a one year period), when Mary is discovered to be pregnant.

Conventional wisdom at this point in this culture would have been rather simple. Divorce.

Mary had obviously been unfaithful. The wedding would obviously be called off. Joseph owed her nothing.

But even *before* Joseph learns the truth about Mary's pregnancy, he resolves to take an unconventional path. Verse 19 says that Joseph was a righteous man, and decided to divorce her quietly to spare her the public scorn and disgrace that were undoubtedly coming her way, as an unwed, pregnant Jewish teenage girl.

After Joseph resolves to pursue this course, the angel appears, telling him not to be afraid, to take Mary as his wife, for the child is from the Holy Spirit.

The angel tells Joseph to name him "Jesus" (Hebrew *Yeshua* or "Joshua," which means "one who saves").

And then Matthew makes a peculiar move. He says that *this* story—a baby, a young girl, a kind of confused but trusting young man—is actually a fulfillment of *that* story from Isaiah 7 (the text we just looked at). He quotes verse 14:

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Immanuel.

What is Matthew doing here? Doesn't he know that the sign in Isaiah was spoken to a faithless king in the context of looming war and judgment and exile?

Doesn't Matthew know that "the sign of Immanuel" in Isaiah had been fulfilled long ago—whoever the child was—when the nations of Syria and Israel were conquered by the Assyrian Empire?

Doesn't he know that *this* has nothing to do with *that*?

According to New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, prior to the gospel of Matthew, there is no indication that *anyone* in the Jewish tradition would have thought that Isaiah 7:14 was a prophecy about the coming Messiah.

So, what's going on here? Is Matthew playing fast and loose with the facts?

I don't think so. Walter Brueggemann suggests that Matthew's usage of this text from Isaiah is a "reinterpretation in a new key."

We see this frequently in the Bible: people reinterpreting, expanding, clarifying, filling in the blanks, *in light of where God is taking the story*.

The apostle Paul does this frequently. One famous example is his reinterpretation of the story of Hagar and Ishmael from Genesis. Paul interprets it as an allegory pointing to our freedom in Christ as opposed to enslavement to the law.

Nobody in the Jewish tradition would have read this text in this way. But Paul felt free to re-read it in light of the new reality of Jesus.

We see Jesus himself doing this in his famous, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." in the Sermon on the Mount.

The New Testament Jewish writers frequently look at their Jewish Scriptures and see evidence of God's work and God's promise being fulfilled in surprising, unsettling, confusing ways.

They frequently see their story not as a choice between *this or that* but *this and that*.

In Matthew, we see a text that had been read as a text of judgment and warning being reinterpreted or expanded upon, and pointing to God being with his people.

Where Isaiah pointed to “God with us” in the face of the threat of Empire and political maneuvering, Matthew links Immanuel—“God with us”—to *Yeshua*, “Jesus,” the one who saves. The one who will deliver all of humanity from the tyranny of sin.

This *and* that.

So what do these two characters have to say to us, as Advent draws to a close, as the birth of the Christ child draws near?

I think the message is both simple and profound, both easy and incredibly demanding.

Trust. This one word that is so easy to say and so hard to actually do.

Both King Ahaz of Judah and Joseph were given the opportunity to trust God.

Both were recipients of the news of Immanuel, even if it looked different in each case.

Both were given the opportunity to trust.

King Ahaz failed the test. He is a symbol of following “conventional wisdom,” trusting in political maneuvering and power to achieve an imagined security.

He is not the first person to choose this path and he will not be the last.

Joseph, on the other hand, passed the test. He trusted God when the easiest thing in the world would have been to abandon his bride-to-be. He risked shame and ridicule and uncertainty, and cast his lot with *Yeshua*, “the God who saves,” with Immanuel, “God with us.”

The question to us is quite simple. Are we prepared to trust, even when the manner of God’s dwelling with us is unexpected?

Even when “God with us” looks strange and unsettling, even when God seems absent or remote?

Even when the Christmas lights and wrapping paper are all put away, and the

ordinary demands of life come rushing back in?

Even when it is difficult or inconvenient?

Even when conventional wisdom seems to point in the opposite direction?

Even when security seems easier to attain elsewhere?

Even when the way God is asking us to go seems counterintuitive and risky?

Are we prepared to trust God, for this or for that?

Christmas is almost here. The old, old story will be told again, this mysterious story about God's dwelling *in* humanity, *with* humanity, and *for* humanity.

But the opportunities to trust are always new.

We can, like Ahaz, seek to preserve and protect the future by our own means.

Or, like Joseph, we can trust that the God of this messy story that we are a part of is up to something...

That that something is good...

And that this God can be trusted with our futures, too.

The choice is ours.

Amen.

