

## Isaiah 7:10-16

<sup>10</sup>Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, <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>And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup>Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. <sup>15</sup>He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. <sup>16</sup>For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.

## GOD WITH US

I recently received some good advice which I would like to pass on to all the men in our congregation. Here are some things our wives don't want to hear from us on Christmas Day:

"You like it, hon? Almost looks like read diamonds, doesn't it?" "That's right, hon, your own subscription to *Guns and Ammo!*" "It's two sizes smaller, darling—you know, for motivation." "Well, if it isn't Roy and Angela and their seven children, with suitcases! Merry Christmas!"

That doesn't have anything to do with today's message, of course, but I think men can always use good advice. Now, on to our text...

Verse 14 is one of the classic Christmas prophecies. It's most familiar to us from the Gospel of Matthew (1:22-24). But I have never heard a sermon on the prophecy in its original Old Testament context. We'll look at that together briefly before returning to the Christmas Gospel.

This King Ahaz was a real weasel. He did face problems, but the way he chose to deal with them was, in a word, ungodly. He was the king of Judah, the southern kingdom of the old Israel. After King Solomon died, the country split in two in a civil war, with ten tribes forming the northern kingdom, called simply "Israel," and the remaining two tribes, centered on Jerusalem, called "Judah" (from which we eventually got the word "Jew").

Judah had been invaded by a coalition of Israel and Syria. Their armies had not been able to reach Jerusalem the first time, but they were preparing for another invasion. In the middle of this crisis God had given a message to the prophet Isaiah. He told King Ahaz that the invasion would fail and the invading countries would be destroyed. The message ended with the words, "*If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all*" (Isaiah 7:9). Ahaz refused to believe Isaiah. So the Lord offered to give him a sign "*as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven.*"

"*I will not put the Lord to the test,*" Ahaz replied piously. What he didn't say is that he had already secretly made an alliance with Assyria, the huge and dangerous empire east of Syria. He was counting on this alliance to save his kingdom. So he didn't want a message from God that contradicted his plans. (Good thing for him Wikileaks wasn't around then!) This attitude is as common as crabgrass in this fallen world. Atheists and other unbelievers have sometimes told me they would believe if God would only speak to them personally. But when I probe deeper, they expect something on the order of "Happy

Holidays” or “You’re such a good boy, I love you!” The problem is, that’s not the kind of message a holy God can give to an unsaved person. The only message such a person would be given would be “Repent! Turn away from your sins!” There’s no way a holy God will give an undemanding, sentimental message to the unrepentant. And since the last thing most people want to do is to have their lifestyle changed, they really don’t want a message from the Lord.

Neither did King Ahaz. So God replied through the prophet that He would give Ahaz a sign whether he wanted one or not. *“Hear then, O house of David [speaking of the royal throne of Judah], “Is it too little for you to weary men, that you should weary God also?”* God’s patience was up with Ahaz.

So here is the sign: A young woman will have a child, and before this child is about three years old (or weaned), the empires you fear will be destroyed. This child will be a sign that God is with Judah.

Wait a minute, you ask, don’t you believe in the virgin birth? Why did you translate the word “young woman” when Matthew uses the word “virgin”? I do, but we have to treat the words of the Bible carefully. The word used, *almah*, is not the technical Hebrew word for “virgin.” It simply means a young woman of marriageable age, who in those days would be presumed to be a virgin until married. Remember that we are talking about the actual literal meaning of the prophecy for Isaiah’s time. No one would be miraculously born of a virgin until Jesus of Nazareth. When Matthew looked back at this prophecy, he saw its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. But back to Isaiah’s time...

To understand how this turned out for Ahaz, we have to read verse 17 in our text. *“The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”* The very thing you are trusting in to deliver you is going to come back to bite you. Your future war with Assyria will be more terrible than anything Israel and Syria could give you.

And here’s the principle: people who use anything to avoid listening to God will be destroyed by the very thing they are relying on. If you turn to drugs instead of God, if you turn to sexual immorality instead of God, if you turn to any kind of idol at all, it will become the means of your destruction, not your salvation.

Now let us turn to the ultimate meaning of the prophecy. You will remember that Old Testament prophecies almost always look toward events like a series of mountain ranges, each one higher than the other, but looking as if they were close together even when separated by hundreds of years. The more immediate event foreshadows the final fulfillment. This is the way God looks at human history. We don’t understand very much about this. It’s as if God sees our history as a great epic poem, with events heralding later events in a series of patterns. The prophetic writings allow us to see a little of this, but we probably won’t understand all the patterns until eternity, if then.

So the birth of Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate sign to fallen man. Like Ahaz, we have made a mess of things. The results of sin in our world are incalculable to us. Only God has any idea of the total sum. And don’t forget that we made this mess, not God. All the wars and oppression and terrorism and violence and crime, all the politically caused starvation and fear – and, yes, all the little things, the hatreds and the resentments, the divorces and the

abuses, the immorality and the degradation – all these evils were created by man, not God. So why would He want to have anything to do with us?

That's the big miracle of Christmas, not the virgin birth. That would be easy for God! The ultimate miracle is that God would want to be "with us" at all. We are no different than Ahaz, with our schemes and our hypocrisies. Why would Jesus want to come here?

But that's exactly what He did. He not only came to us, He became one of us. He is "God with us" in its most intimate and personal sense. The indignity of the stable and the manger is nothing compared to the indignity of entering our sinful world in the first place.

And what does this mean to you individually? Let me tell you a story.

A pastor tells about a big Christmas party given at one of his denomination's childrens' homes. One of the smallest boys, named Tommy, had recently been sent to the home from an abusive family. When he was invited to the party, he froze and immediately ran and hid under his bed. No one could talk him into coming to the party. Finally Rev. Carter, the home's director, got down on his knees and lifted the bedspread. He found himself looking into two tear-filled eyes. Not knowing what else to do, the pastor got down on the floor and crawled under the bed with Tommy.

He quietly began to tell Tommy about the party, the tree, and the Christmas treats. Then he told him the story of the first Christmas, when Jesus came to earth to be our savior. When he had finally run out of things to say, he just lay there under the bed with the child. After a while he felt a small hand touching him. He held the boy's hand for a few minutes, and then said, "Tommy, it's kind of crowded in here. Why don't we stand up together?" So the pastor and the boy crawled out from under the bed, and Tommy was gently led to the party, where his own present awaited him.

That's just like what happened to us when you were born again. Jesus came to you in the darkness and gently invited you to the party. He took your hand and led you into the light. He didn't shy away from your hurt, from your shame, from your desperation. He came right there under the bed with you.

God is with us where we really live. He is with us in the problems of our own making, in the times of darkness, in the confusion and pain of real life.

But now let's be honest, is it all sweetness and light? Do we ever feel like crawling under the bed even as Christians? Of course we do! Everyone has dark times of pain or shame. So does Christ abandon us then? Well, it sometimes feels like He does, even though He never forsakes us. It is times like these when we really need Christian fellowship in its true meaning. Not just social conversation, but real burden-bearing (Galatians 6:6). I didn't plan on ending my sermon this way, but this morning when I read from *Streams in the Desert* as part of my devotions, the message struck me with such force that I knew I had to share it with you.

Life is a steep climb, and it does the heart good to have somebody 'call back' and cheerily beckon us up to the high hill. We are all climbers together and we must help one another. This mountain climbing is a serious business, but glorious. It takes strength and a steady step to find the summits. The outlook widens with the altitude. If anyone among us has found anything worthwhile, we ought to 'call back.'

*If you have gone a little way ahead of me, call back—*

*'Twill cheer my heart and help my feet along the stony track;*

*And if, perchance, Faith's light is dim, because the oil is low,  
Your call will guide my lagging course as wearily I go.*

*Call back and tell me that He went with you into the storm;  
Call back and say He kept you when the forest's roots were torn;  
That, when the heavens thundered and the earthquake shook the hill,  
He bore you up and held you where the very air was still.*

*Oh, friend, call back, and tell me, for I cannot see your face;  
They say it glows with triumph, and your feet bound in the race;  
But there are mists between us and my spirit eyes are dim,  
And I cannot see the glory, though I long for word of Him.*

*But if you will say He heard you when your prayer was but a cry,  
And if you'll say He saw you through the night's sin-darkened sky—  
If you have gone a little way ahead, oh, friend, call back—  
'Twill cheer my heart along the stony path."*

God is with us in Jesus even when we don't feel His presence. Let us encourage each other in this truth!