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Emmanuel – Isaiah 7:10-16

For those of you who have been here all four Sundays in Advent, I hope you've found the journey interesting as we've looked at the events spanning somewhat less than a year in three different people's lives: Joseph, Mary's husband; Mary herself; and Zachariah, father of John the Baptist – including his wife, Elizabeth, who after all, had to do all the really hard work.

Today's lesson is the prophecy that both generated all these stories – and wrapped them up, the great Emmanuel Sign of Isaiah.

A little history lesson: Ahaz is the King of Judah, the last of the twelve tribes still resident in Jerusalem. The great nation David and Solomon built up and stabilized broke apart under the misguided reign of Solomon's son. So Abraham's children, the heirs to God's promises to him and to David, became two different nations: Israel, the Northern Kingdom, eventually Samaria; and the Southern Kingdom, still ruled by descendants of King David, known as Judah – though, and somewhat confusingly, both names are sometimes used almost interchangeably about Judah – who Scripture sees as the true heirs of Abraham, since Samaria "went rogue."

Ahaz is a King under dire threat from the Kings of Aram and Israel, who have allied themselves against Judah. We're told earlier in this chapter that "the hearts of Ahaz and all his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind." (7:2b)

But the great prophet Isaiah receives a word from God for Ahaz, and he's told to go with his son to tell Ahaz to "take care and be calm... the evil [those nations] have planned against you shall not come to pass."(7:6)

Here's where we come in. The powers set against Ahaz (called the House of David – since he is David's descendant) and his nation are truly formidable. They are in grave danger. It's easy to see how he could be a bit anxious about what Isaiah has to say, so God offers Ahaz a sign as proof of his intent.

This is important: God *offers* the sign to Ahaz; Ahaz doesn't ask – in fact, he piously says that he "won't test God." His rejection, though, is phony. It's based not on trust, on faith, but on fear and lack of faith. "Sure, Isaiah, whatever you say. Maybe God will; maybe God won't." You could say that it anticipates Zachariah's incredulous response to Gabriel's news about a son to be born to him we looked at last week at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke: "How can this be? For I am an old man, and my wife is an old woman."

And, just as Gabriel gives Zachariah the unasked-for sign of a lost voice, God gives Ahaz what is sometimes called the Emmanuel Sign: A young woman will conceive and bear a son, and by the time he has reached the age of reason, the threat of Aram and Israel will be gone.

Whether Ahaz believes it or not.

That's the context of this story, and it came true, just as God speaking through Isaiah said: Aram and Israel ceased to be a threat.

So what's the word for us here? Well, then and now, people doubt God's power to act; but one thing, certainly: it shouts out the difference between what the world displays to us and what God has planned.

In a way, this sign is – or has become – a sort of turning point in the story of God's history with humans. We started out in this great paradise, messed that up; populated the world, and messed that up; were given a covenant, a promise, an agreement, a treaty with God that all we needed to do was follow a few simple rules in return for all God's blessing – which, even before Moses brought them down from the mountain where he'd received them direct from the hand of God, we messed up. Then God gave his people a king, and between the kings and the people, things got sideways again.

But here, in this sign that few understood even in its original setting – not even the one to whom it was given – the gift of God's new

agreement with us is revealed: God is with us – Emmanuel – will come to you, people of God.

And in the final fulfilment of that promise, in Jesus Christ, we know what it means for God to be with us – however much we prefer to be more like Ahaz: “Yeah, sure, whatever you say.”

A child growing into the promise of a world made right is a glorious concept for a world in any age, especially our own, where once again the backdrop for these words – and the Gospel of Matthew’s use of them, as well as nearly every Christmas carol – the background for all this joy and peace and promise is strife, chaos, and inhumanity, not peace.

One way of condensing all of God’s salvation history, God’s work to reconcile us to him, is to see that history as one of humanity going our own way, starting in the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel – the first murder in Scripture, and moving through the great flood and Noah’s survival, Abraham and Sarah and the promise to make a great nation of this faithful couple, the Exodus and Moses, up to the nation of Israel, its fall, the fall of Judah, the coming of Christ, and people’s attempts to be faithful to God in Christ up to this very morning. Always new, always set in the present. Sometimes – often – people use some twisting of Scripture to justify doing exactly the opposite of what God is doing, and

our three earlier journeys in Advent have shown us how some very faithful people of Scripture managed to catch God's true desire.

Through all the twists and turns, God continues throughout this long and complicated journey to lead us – sometimes pull us – forward into the light of Christ, the new reality that God offers in Jesus.

I'm going to borrow an image from Diane that really strikes me: several times I've heard her remark about the 23rd Psalm, where it says, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow...", that you can't have a shadow without a source of light. That light is Christ. Here's where I'm going off on my own: and the shadows cast over this world are cast by us when we get between the light of God and Christ and something or someone else.

How do we cast that shadow? How do we get between someone and the light of Christ? By turning away from someone's need or pain. By rejecting the idea that God might be doing something new right in front of you or *through* you, because it looks or feels different: "That's not the way we used to do it;" "God doesn't do things like that;" "I like things just the way they are;" "All I ever really needed to know about Jesus I learned in Sunday School." There are thousands of ways we can twist God to fit our own preconceptions, and then use those to push away those people or situations that make us uncomfortable or that we don't like – justifying ourselves by saying that it's really God doing the

pushing, a God that we've tried to squeeze into our own image, rather than the other way around.

Let me tell you something: *God is never going to deliberately move us between him and someone else.* We do it ourselves, not always consciously.

Here we are, as we are, today, just hours away from the celebration of the birth of our Savior, the one God intended to bridge the unbridgeable gap between our self-involved humanness and God's incredible patience, generosity, and love: to come to us as one of us - Emmanuel. We have lived a good while, by now; the layers of life that surround our hearts and stifle our souls try to keep us from growing into new creations in Christ. I must remind you that both the Hebrew prophets and the writers of the New Testament talk over and over about how God is doing something new *right now* or in the near future, something unexpected, something like a teenaged unwed pregnant peasant girl or a law-abiding man who discovers the law he learned doesn't cover what God is revealing to him or a couple who learn they are to be blessed in a very complicated way by a baby in their old age – or even Peter, or Paul, or any of the disciples; Martin Luther, or Martin Luther King, Jr.; John Calvin or Pope Francis...or *you*.

What does this have to do with you, sitting in your almost-comfortable pew, looking out at the beauty of creation, surrounded by the God-given joy of music and fellowship, waiting for Christmas?

Well, this new thing that God continues to do among us in Christ is found in us when we do God's will, instead of following our human instincts and ways of seeing right and wrong. It comes when we ask the overused question, "Faced with this situation, what would Jesus do?" When we listen for God's whispers, accept God's signs.

And we have seen examples of that all month, all Advent. Joseph, who wouldn't stone Mary, couldn't lie by saying Jesus was his son, but by the grace of God through the voice of an angel, became God's earthly father. Mary, who didn't tell Gabriel "No way!", but bore a son to save us from our sins, our selves. Zachariah, who found his voice when he did God's will, old as he and Elizabeth were.

Where have you gone this Advent? What has been your own journey, and where has it taken you? All these journeys are our journey. We are a part of God's working in and among the people he created. Are you willing this Christmas to be someone new, a ready instrument of God's love and mercy – even now, when many of us have already had to realize that what *we* might call our best days are behind us?

It's never too late for God to come into your heart, to heal your soul, to use you as he brings the Kingdom into being. Are you, unlike Ahaz, willing to let that happen?

N.T Wright, a great modern writer and theologian, has written, "The whole point of what Jesus was up to was that he was doing close up, in the present, what he was promising long-term in the future. And what he was promising for that future and doing in the present was not saving souls for a disembodied eternity, but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world presently is, so they could enjoy, already in the present, that renewal of creation which is God's ultimate purpose – and so they could thus become colleagues and partners in that project."

Are you ready for the trip?